Co-Founding Oxford House

My role as co-founder of Oxford House
1975 - 1991

by
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Introduction

Who ever could have imagined? We were twelve shaky, newly sober alcoholics in a down-at-the-heels halfway house in Montgomery County, Maryland, near the District of Columbia. But our actions would set the stage to revolutionize thinking in alcohol and drug recovery in the United States, providing a system and encouragement for many tens of thousands of people to furnish themselves shelter. And once in new quarters, they would give each other enough nurturing and understanding to get a toehold on sobriety, self-respect and new lives.

People in Alcoholics Anonymous and the recovery businesses like detoxes, hospitals and rehabilitation centers had always known that alcoholics, many of whom had lost everything, needed a stable, supportive place to live in the early months of sobriety, or most resumed drinking.

But who would provide large-scale housing for such a dubious population? Governments weren't in the housing business for alcoholics. The few local government and not-for-profit organizations providing halfway houses found themselves having to deal with real estate, regulation, fund-raising and management for small populations. NIMBY problems were predictable, especially when the word "homeless" was mentioned, and many alcoholics fit the definition.

The upshot was that most alcoholics returned from early AA meetings and rehab facilities, moved to problematic neighborhoods where they had spent their drinking years, or to toxic family situations, and the outcomes were often poor.

Five months after I moved into a Montgomery County, Maryland, halfway house the county yanked the funding. We found we could keep the lease so we opted to stay. Then we made the momentous discovery that as sober alcoholics we could get jobs and support ourselves and one another. A second remarkable realization was that we didn't need somebody to manage our lives. We may have acted like fools when drinking, but when sober we were as smart and clever as others. We established our own system of living together with few rules. We were no longer serfs struggling haplessly in somebody else's realm. We were the system; lords of our own manor, free to fail or prosper on our own.

Self government with a population like we were was never easy. There's a saying that alcoholics come from Yale and jail. In 1975 at our Alpha House in Silver Spring, Maryland, there were no Ivy league graduates. Some drank, some didn't pay rent or

pilfered others' rent, some had physical or mental health problems. But we took pride in our realm and in six months gave money away to start another house. We named our quasi-dingy halfway house Oxford House because the Oxford Group, a small religious movement, was important in the founding of AA. We needed a name, and it sounded high class and solid, like the lives to which we aspired.

Little did we suspect that our ragtag group of men in the first Oxford Houses, because of our creativity and generosity in helping expand the concept of self support and independent living, would fundamentally change thinking in the recovery world.

Group housing, paid for and managed by residents, dramatically supported early sobriety. This is an extraordinary story of how people on the lowest rung of society joined together to create success out of their desire to change and be useful to others. The success of early Oxford Houses set the stage for rapid expansion of transitional housing that would revolutionize strategies in the recovery world, motivating Oxford House residents, government agencies, and private groups to support expansion of new Oxford Houses around the Washington, D.C., area and eventually across the nation. Tonight there may be about 20,500 men and women living in some 3,500 alcohol and drug free Oxford Houses.

This is the history of the early years of Oxford House, as well and faithfully as I can tell it. I knew intuitively from the outset that Oxford Houses could work. I've never been a pack rat about anything else in my life, having saved little source material or finished products from the hundreds of newspaper and magazine stories I've written. But I saved every scrap of paper regarding Oxford Houses because I thought someday the story would need to be told. Among my treasures are a photo of the first Oxford House abutting a parking lot of what is now the subway in Silver Spring, Maryland, and the yellowing classified ad from a 1976 *Washington Post* of a house for rent that became the second Oxford House.

I was elected president of the first, second and third Oxford Houses, and for years was president of the Oxford House umbrella organization as we expanded. I remember with satisfaction how I worked a full-time job, spending free time locating suitable houses to be Oxford Houses, persuading homeowners to rent to alcoholics and drug addicts, lending money to help with startups, and mediating structural and behavioral issues that arose.

In twelve-step organizations members tell their addiction stories to groups: how it was when they drank, how they got sober, and how their lives have been renewed, hoping others will identify with their struggles and follow their paths. It's colloquially called a drunkalog.

I'll offer some of my drunkalog and it'll be clear why I needed a supportive living situation like Oxford House to survive.

My Story

In May of 1975 I was a 33-year-old with an 11-year-old car, a portable typewriter and several hundred dollars, most reserved for cheap liquor. My promising career as a newspaper reporter in South Carolina and south Florida had ended abruptly, more than once if you get my drift. For instance, my last assignment in Florida was to cover a speech by Gov. Claude Kirk in politically contentious Broward County. I arrived early and drank some vodka in the parking lot where I was overtaken by slumber. When I awoke the speech had ended and my car was in an almost-empty parking lot. It was the last straw and I was fired, of course, and a few days later was driving north on Interstate 95.

To say my life was grim was an understatement. In addition to being fired from good jobs, I had been discharged from alcohol rehabs for smuggling in booze and been a patient in emergency rooms with IVs in my arm for hydration because I couldn't keep liquid down. I was on a speeding train to some desolate spot where I would die—cold, alone and hungry, soon to be forgotten.

I had lived in Washington, D.C., for about a year in 1963, working in the correspondence section of the FBI until, soon to be drafted, I returned south to join the National Guard. After the military service I became a newspaper reporter for large daily papers in South Carolina and South Florida.

I made my ignominious return to the nation's capital in March of 1975 because I had used up my good will and relationships in the South. If you're alive you have to be somewhere.

I rented a cheap room near George Washington University, not far from the White House, and spent my time drinking and worrying about what to do when my money ran out. Eating little more than a sandwich daily, my physical health deteriorated. Several times I rose from the uncomfortable futon that served as couch and bed and began racing forward, head down, until crashing into the opposite wall. I couldn't walk without staggering. I was fearful my nearby liquor store on Virginia Avenue, wouldn't sell to me because I was too drunk. My brain was addled.

Clearly my life was about to end. I couldn't get sober to look for work and I drank too much to contemplate a regular job. I didn't think I was street-smart enough to live in shelters or parks.

When liquor, desperation and self pity utterly failed as a business plan for life, one day I found a phone book and looked up the address of the AA office on Connecticut Avenue in the District. I took a bus to the office one evening because I was too drunk to consider driving, walked into the building and knocked on the door. An AA member,

a Naval lieutenant commander in uniform, was answering phones. He told me it was against the rules to let drunks inside, but if I would sit and listen quietly I could enter. The things I learned there were life-saving to me. He told one person on the phone: “If you want to be sober you can’t drink anything with alcohol, ever.” It was like that had never occurred to me. He gave me the address of the Del Ray Club in Bethesda, Maryland, where AA members held meetings, commiserated, drank coffee and played bridge.

I don’t remember the exact sequence of events, but at the Del Ray Club I was put in touch with W.H., an underemployed lawyer, who cashed a check and introduced me to Tom Powers, a lawyer who was connected with the Montgomery County, Maryland, recovery facilities. These included halfway houses called Alpha Houses. Powers said if I could stay sober a few days he would find a slot for me in one of the houses. His definition of “sober for a few days” varied from mine but I badly needed a place to live. But I still wanted to look presentable and pretend my life, career and relationships weren’t filled with a crushing emptiness.

So in the “sober for a few days,” my days began in the restroom of Robert’s Restaurant on Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda, Maryland, just north of the District of Columbia line. I concealed a razor and comb in my pocket. I’d lather up and begin shaving unless an intruder entered, one who ate at Robert’s, which I couldn’t afford, and I slipped the razor back into my pocket. I would linger until I was alone, and finish shaving. Then with a shirt that unbuttoned in the front I lathered up a hand towel or two and washed my underarms and torso. Feeling a bit refreshed, I took a two-ounce medicine bottle from my pocket which I kept filled with vodka, took a few sips and walked outside to face the day, going to the Del Ray Club for bridge and conversation.

Unwilling to pay a week’s rent when I might be in a halfway house in a few days, at night I slept in my 1964 Chevrolet Malibu which was often my dining room, personal barroom, and sometimes a sleeping quarters, the front seat being just the right width for spending the night, with a door handle that neatly supported a pillow. My last night of drinking before going to the halfway house was spent in my Chevrolet on Brandywine Street in northwest Washington. Remembering those desperate days today, after 50 years without a drink of alcohol, there may have been a bit of cleverness, but it was not amusing. It unnerves me now to remember how devoid I was of resources, and how humiliated I was, and how frightened I was that I could end up living on the streets.

Yet one year later my life had changed dramatically. With the nurturing support of others in recovery, I had been a year without a drink, had money in the bank, and had a good job analyzing and writing about developments on Capitol Hill for a multi-billion dollar industry. More important, I and some of my comrades, were moving into what would become the second Oxford House.

In the Beginning: 1975–1977

On May 8, 1975, when my "few days of sobriety" had been met, I checked into the halfway house in what had once been a Montgomery County building on 16th Street, just below Georgia Avenue, some two blocks from the District of Columbia. About 11 men lived there in a dormitory-type setting with dining and shower areas. In some ways the large room resembled summer camp or Army barracks, with a house manager instead of a sergeant on the end bunk. The rent was low, a sliding scale from $15 to about $35 a week for room and board.

The first evening in the house I met Paul Molloy, a lawyer and former Capitol Hill staffer, who had just been hired to work for the Commerce Committee of the House of Representatives. We were later to form an informal partnership to develop Oxford Houses. The first night he invited me to join him at an AA meeting in Garrett Park, a nearby town.

The house had rules about finding work, attending AA meetings, a curfew, house cleaning and such. It also had limits on how long residents could stay before being forced to move.

The facilities were basic, but to me it felt like I had been walking down a street in a strange town, penniless and desperate, occasionally glancing into windows where happy strangers were feasting on food around tables filled with laughter and fellowship, when at one house, instead of ignoring a passing sad man, someone opened the door and said, "Come on in; You're welcome here; Have some food and hot coffee; Stay here with us; You'll be safe; We'll help with your problems."

I became friends with Jim S., a former bank loan officer who wasn't welcome in his own home at the time, and we began working day labor for a fire restoration company. I saved a few bucks, and my physical health and strength returned. The halfway house felt better than a Marriott to me because there I learned about recovery and heard stories of what happened to those who kept drinking. There would have been loneliness at the Marriott. There was none at the halfway house.

When in a few months Montgomery County pulled funding for the facility where we lived, we were transferred to another halfway house at 1219 Fidler Lane, about two blocks away, a more traditional house. It had a living room with a television that was seldom on in the evening because we were at 12-step meetings. That led into a dining area and kitchen, with two bedrooms and one bath upstairs. Downstairs was a common area, three bedrooms and one bath. The back wing had an upstairs area with a bedroom. There we lived with a minimum of supervision because the manager, who worked in the building trades, was disinterested.

Learning to live sober for me was complicated and uncomfortable, as I expected after dealing with every anxiety for years with alcohol. I worked mindless jobs like chopping vegetables and occasionally tending bar at parties for a caterer. Nights I went to the Del Ray Club for meetings and to improve my bridge game. Back at the house we sat around chatting about our drinking years and how we needed to change to have a chance at lives.

Five months after moving into the county halfway house system, in October, I drove alone on Labor Day weekend to spend a couple days in New York City, then to Boothbay Harbor, Maine, and over the Green Mountains to Vermont, where my AA sponsor owned a ski resort. I scheduled a glider flight there on October 13, my birthday, but it rained, and the wind howled and it was cancelled. But new adventures seemed possible.

I saved money because I knew the county's rules: after six months, residents had to move to make room for others. It was frightening to think of renting an apartment, having to contend with loneliness that could test sobriety.

In late October, just before my six-month halfway residency was supposed to end, again we learned Montgomery County had funding problems and was closing a second halfway house—ours—and this time there was nowhere for us to be transferred.

First House—Fidler Lane

Fortunately, the man who held the lease on our house suggested we assume the lease and continue to live there on our own. As a sweetener we could keep the furniture. I believe that without this sweetener we would have scattered to find shelter on our own.

Molloy and I discussed the idea of assuming the lease and staying put. It was a no-brainer. We had a supportive community among ourselves. Why move when we didn't have to? We would have to convince everyone to set aside their institutional mindset and cooperate. We could set our own behavioral and financial standards. All house residents endorsed the plan without reservation. Molloy and I signed the lease. This would be the first Oxford House.

We, especially Molloy, must have had big plans from the outset. We outlined our system of living in December, 1975.[1] In June of 1976 we filed to be incorporated as a not-for-profit in Maryland.[2]

Not having a manager and institutional rules was liberating but there was a rub. The crucial obstacle to a harmonious house was how to deal with people who drank or used drugs. We didn't like drunks when we were the drunks. How could we keep our house under our own management from becoming a house occupied by drinkers? Sober residents would move out if it became a residence for slovenly drunks.

We had an organizational meeting where I was elected house president. We decided the rent would be $30 a week and we would buy staples like coffee, sugar, bacon, eggs, bread and potatoes out of the kitty in case people were short when they moved in and needed some breakfast food. Then we made a mountainously stupid decision: we would allow house residents “one bite of the apple.” If they drank away from the house they could stay, with a warning that if they did it again they would be ousted. If they drank in the house they would be evicted immediately.

We should have known the “one bite” policy wouldn’t work. We needed additional pressure to handle temptations to drink. Our house was far from a Hilton, with shared rooms and no maid service, but for most of us it was the closest thing we had to family at the time. It was like a fraternity house or hunting lodge with safety and camaraderie, so to get banished by your mates for drinking, to be on the curb with your possessions and no place to go would be the height of humiliation and emotional pain. There would be those who tested the drinking system, but their own behavior always quickly betrayed them.

One evening several of us were chatting in the living room when one of our housemates opened the front door, gave us a furtive glance and proceeded to his room. We looked at each other and we knew he was drinking.

The next morning Molloy asked me where I would hide a bottle in my room if I were so inclined. I answered from experience: “In my back overcoat pocket facing the wall in my closet.” Without consulting the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution about searches, we walked into his room, reached to the back of his overcoat, pulling out a pint of blended whiskey. That night he and the whiskey were on the curb.

We talked about getting a breathalyzer but they were expensive and none of us had been to breathalyzer school to learn to use one. Instead, we decided that observation was better than a breathalyzer anyway. None of our comrades could drink for even a few days without behavioral changes the would make it obvious.

We quickly changed the “one bite of the apple” rule. We met to pass a rule that anybody who drank any alcohol anywhere would be evicted. We never took pleasure in ousting anyone. But relapse is common in early sobriety and needed to be dealt with for the common good. It was a strong motivation to know we couldn’t drink, even a sip anywhere, and stay in the house.

There was the question of how anybody would be accepted as a resident. At first it was informal. Twice somebody appeared at the door with some possessions and a cab outside. I took them in and told others about it later. Nobody objected. We needed a full house to meet expenses. Later, at many houses, an 80 percent approval would be required for acceptance.

One resident who appeared at the door that I took in alleged to be an Austrian baron fresh from Switzerland whose wallet was flattened by his family. He seemed to have no knowledge of kitchens and food preparation, or washing machines and such, saying "footmen" handled those trifles. There had never been any barons or footmen in my social circles, but I assume he was legitimate and must have been special because the county alcoholism councilors were always trying to endear themselves to him while ignoring us.

He moved and later I saw an item in the "Ear," the syndicated gossip column in the *Washington Evening Star*, the afternoon daily newspaper, asking words to the effect: "What happened to the handsome baron who was escorting" a prominent D.C. socialite.

The remainder of us untitled alcoholics found ways to be tolerant of one another, smoothing over disagreements, happy to have a comfortable place to live sober.

One evening we sat in the living room trying to pick a name for our sober house. We put together names that had crude acronyms, like "Sobriety Hours In Town," and worse. But when the laughter subsided and I mentioned "Oxford House," we all knew we had a name. It sounded good and the Oxford Groups, a small religious organization, played a key role in the founding of AA.

One Saturday afternoon I was leaving the house when I saw about four residents drinking near beer in the living room. NEAR BEER! Freedom from bureaucratic rules was one thing, but seeing how much you can take, when it might not be very much, seemed idiotic. Why not spend the afternoon sniffing different type of Scotch? I mentioned my low opinion of ersatz beer and left. The fad soon ended.

One Saturday I got our statement from the bank showing nothing but dust in our account. I walked into the treasurer's room and asked why the bank reported we were penniless. He told me the cash was in his sock drawer. I grabbed the money and hurried to the bank. Nothing bounced.

The umbrella Oxford House organization, the one we incorporated, had no bank account, but our house, and subsequent houses, had to have an account to pay bills. For several years we had no internal controls governing house treasurers. We were to pay a price for this oversight more than once.

The existence of Oxford House was always tenuous because of behavioral, alcohol-related, financial and regulatory problems in the early years.

For instance, at the first house we had a housemate who didn't work and rose most afternoons not long before the sun set. He ate only the house-provided staples and was defensive when his lifestyle was mentioned. When he got two weeks behind on rent we voted him out of the house. On hearing the news that evening he hurled a

coffee mug across the common area downstairs, leaving a slash in the drywall. Tempers flared and he was informed he would have to be out early in the a.m. He responded by saying he would burn the house down that night.

I heard of the threat and approached his room. There was a housemate in his doorway who said to him: "[Name of mug-hurler], you may think you can get away with this behavior because you're crazy, but I've been diagnosed crazy too and I'm crazier than you. If I smell one whiff of smoke tonight I'll come down here and cut your [two sensitive appendages] off."

The night was smoke free, but the young man wasn't through. The next day he went to the county Landlord-Tenant office and returned in the afternoon with a piece of paper saying he had a legal right to stay. While he was away others put his belongings in the side yard. When he returned he was told it would be unhealthy for him to come inside. He gave up.

This young man obviously needed, as mental health practitioners say, "a higher level of care." If the wannabe arsonist and the Landlord Tenant office had followed up on the complaint, the early Oxford House operation would have been in trouble.

Bureaucracy Responds to First House

The most malevolent, underhanded danger to our existence was from the bureaucrats who should have been our cheerleaders. When we became independent, self-supporting and democratically run, we thought the leaders of the alcohol education and treatment system would be supportive. After all, lives were at stake.

We couldn't have been more wrong. They wanted our house padlocked out of jealousy, what they perceived as self preservation, or the fear that something might be successful without their input.

One exception in 1976 was Riley Regan, then Montgomery County, Maryland's, alcoholism director, who was later to be director of the New Jersey Division of Alcoholism. In a story on Oxford House 12 years later in *The Washington Post Magazine*, Regan revealed how unseen enemies were trying to destroy our new recovery house.[3] **"**People working directly for the alcoholism programs were making anonymous phone calls, sending in the fire marshals and the environmental protection people," Regan said. "They were motivated by a concern that: 'My God, this might be able to work without our brilliance,' and they were beating up on me regularly saying, 'You gotta kick these guys out of there'." Regan told our county alcohol bureaucracy to leave us alone; that "they might just might get some drunks sobered up."

Oxford House was hanging by a thread and one man in the right position, Riley Regan, saved it from destruction. We honor his memory.

One day the man who had overseen our former halfway house and was manager of another county halfway house, and a couple of official-looking people, knocked and began nosing around our living room. I asked what they wanted. He said they were there for an inspection. I told him no inspection would be allowed.

"It'll be a flop house," he said.

"Then you need to go," I said.

That remark saying we would turn into a "flop house" was quoted many times as a motivator when times were problematic.

Looking back across the decades I hope I have little resentment for the attempts to bury us. I hope they were doing the best they could, even if grossly misguided. I know I never got sober for any appreciable length of time until the day I entered the county halfway house and I haven't had a drink of alcohol for 50 years, and might not have lived another 50 days if I hadn't found a supportive place to live. I have deep and abiding appreciation for the work they did giving me an opportunity to have a life.

Two weeks before Christmas I quit my job at a caterer's, thinking I had been sober long enough to handle a job with good pay and responsibility. A friend in recovery said a sober friend of his was leaving a job with the Atomic Industrial Forum, the professional association of the nuclear power industry. I knew nothing about nuclear power, but managed to arrange an interview. I quickly studied nuclear power parlance, learned some technical words, talked to people in the business, and read about public acceptance problems of the industry. To my amazement I got the job. My prime responsibility, similar to my experience as a newspaper reporter, was talking to members of Congress and their staffs, attending hearings, and gleaning information from professionals at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, and State Department to assess the political future of the industry. I wrote reports to the forum's hundreds of members, which were the electric utilities, public utility commissions, architect-engineers, universities, and related industries.

I was paid well and treated like a competent professional although top management knew my drinking history. From my 12th floor office in Bethesda I could see the tip of the Washington Monument and the airplanes soar after leaving National Airport. I had to pinch myself every day.

Back on Fidler Lane the house was full, the bills were paid and we had mostly settled into a routine. Everyone who drank had been evicted. We never had AA meetings at the house or requirements that we attend. But the house was usually empty in the evening as we left for our favorite meetings. AA was where we got our sobriety. To a large extent, Oxford House was where we lived it.

We noticed a new phenomena. The telephone began to ring with newly sober people searching for a place to live, and from alcohol and drug treatment facilities and hospitals in search of some place to help their patients begin a sober life. In spite of the official distaste of Oxford House from the county, we were one of the few places in a vast city where the nearly destitute could find a bed, food and people who would help them stay sober.

Personally I had to decide what to do. Living with 11 or 12 men in a house for a year was getting old. I wanted privacy but hated the thought of leaving my newfound friends. Molloy and I talked of leasing a second house and using the Oxford House system to manage it. Molloy was small in stature but big in ideas and charisma. When he suggested something others tended to believe it was possible.

Second House—Fessenden

But weeks and months passed and there was no further discussion or actions to locate a second house. I began to believe none of us would take the risk and initiative. I felt reasonably sure that with the help of AA and the Del Ray Club I could stay sober. So one Saturday late in April I began looking for an apartment to rent. While perusing the Washington Post classified ads my eyes fell on "furnished houses for rent," in Washington. One ad was for a house that seemed affordable, in a terrific location near Wisconsin Avenue just a couple of miles north of Georgetown, a trendy bedroom, shopping, and tourist center.

Molloy was in a conversation in the living room. I interrupted, dropped the classified page in his lap with the ad circled and said, "There's our house. Let's go." And off we went. It was a narrow house on a corner of 41st and Fessenden Streets never destined to make the cover of *Architectural Digest*. But we were unsure how welcome a group of recovering alcoholics would be in the rental market so on May 4, 1976, Molloy and I signed a one-year lease: $750 a month.[4] Now we had to come up with the $1,500 for the first month's rent and a security deposit.

I don't recall the exact sum, but the Fidler Lane house had accumulated a surplus of about $1,000. I called a meeting and asked if everybody wanted to donate to seed a second house. We could have bought a fancy new color TV, or skipped a few weeks of rent. But there was a unanimous vote to give away the money so others could have what we had—a chance to live and get sober together. Oxford House as an expanding recovery model was born that evening. We borrowed the rest of the $1,500.

Everybody who was at that meeting deserves a mention in this informal history. I made a contemporaneous note of all the people who lived on Fidler Lane the first six months. Some drank and were already living elsewhere, some lived there briefly, but these names, some surnames and some given names, include those who contributed to our expansion: Bill; Baron; Jim; O'Boyle; Bailey; Tavenner; Nelson; Whit; John; Paul;

Richard; Stan; Earl; O'Rourke; Chabot; St. Germain; Raycroft; and Moran.[5] Apologies if someone else was there, is still alive and I didn't mention him.

Four of us packed up and drove from the first house to the Fessenden house. Oxford House was on the move.

The second Oxford House was narrow and the furnishings on the dingy side. The baths were on the first and second floors, requiring the four who would live on the third floor to go downstairs for a bathroom, and the five or six on the second floor to use the nearby bath or parade downstairs to the bath just off the living room. It was insulated poorly. Molloy and I moved into closet-like rooms upstairs, where it was stifling when summer arrived. But the worst was yet to come. The winter of 1977 was brutal. For almost three months temperatures never climbed above freezing. People were walking across the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay on the ice. Oil heating was expensive. We needed extra clothing in the house.

Three episodes in the Fessenden house highlighted our weakness in admitting unsuitable residents or not acting quickly enough to ask them to vacate.

One Sunday several of us were in my car going to Silver Spring. One stocky military veteran I'll call B, was talking about pirates in a way disconnected from our conversations. By afternoon he was having a disjointed chatter with himself about Extreme Unction, the Catholic Church's sacrament for the sick and dying. We knew little about brain malfunctions, but assumed he had stopped taking medication he needed. I found the name of his psychiatrist at the Veterans Administration among his papers and was able to reach him at work the next afternoon. The psychiatrist scolded me like I was a two-year-old for interfering with his treatment plan. We were on our own.

The next day I stopped by the house for lunch and B met me at the front door and ordered me to sit in a chair. He paced back and forth profanely threatening me with severe bodily harm for having the audacity to tattle to his psychiatrist. I said: "'B, I have to pee. I'll be right back." Instead I ran out the back door and didn't stop for a block and took a cab to return to work. We had a resident who moonlighted as a doorman and bouncer at a D.C. nightclub. He met me at the house after work and evicted B. I saw B weeks later drive up in a large van to an AA meeting with a group from the Veterans Administration. He was affable, like nothing had ever happened. No hard feelings, but we learned to gather more information before admitting others to share our house. Then we had a death in the house to emphasize the point.

I returned to the house about dusk on New Year's Eve to learn that a new resident had died. The police and coroner had been there and the body was removed. I couldn't find out much information. But there had been a number of pills in his belongings. We had trouble finding a family member. There was an autopsy but we never learned if his

death could have been a drug overdose or natural causes. His father from out-of-state claimed the body. We obviously needed next-of-kin information on file and self-reporting of medications and mental health treatments to consider when assessing suitability to live in Oxford House.

It also was becoming more and more obvious that when we knew somebody was drinking, to act immediately. We accepted a friendly man, probably in his early fifties. Things went well until he began showing up with a girlfriend who leaned toward the Flower Child genre. His behavior changed but we didn't confront him at first. One night several of us were sitting in the living room when he walked in, plopped on the couch and passed out. After a few minutes he rose, unzipped his pants and in a stupor urinated on the coffee table with splashes all around. Then he sat back down, never regaining anything resembling consciousness. After we told him the next day what he had done, we never saw him again.

We had one errant resident we knew was drinking but we could never catch him to eject him. He would come in about 2:00 in the morning when everybody was asleep and not rise until mid-morning when we were working. One morning I determined to put an end to his game. I shook and shook him until he began to regain consciousness. Finally his bloodshot eyes opened, he looked up at me and muttered: "Are you here in an official capacity?" We both laughed. He badly wanted to live in Oxford House but couldn't manage to stay sober.

I mention a few failures knowing that others will find some lessons learned in the mistakes we made and our weaknesses in organization. I tell these anecdotes because they are so vivid in my mind almost 50 years later. Our reactions in the early days were vital for organizational survival. I know each Oxford House has its own stories.

Developing Oxford House Guidelines

We had arrived, out of necessity, at a formula that worked. It had the following components:

• Rent instead of own, furnished if possible. To try to buy Oxford Houses would have been an anchor around our necks. If need be, scrounge furniture. I spent many weekends with a rented truck picking up beds and furniture from AA members and others who cheerfully parted with used items. Residents filled in the gaps.

• Self government, with each equally responsible for success of the house. Democratic decisions are respected. A minimum of hierarchy with house officers changing every six months. A weekly house meeting is key to smooth functioning.

• Be good neighbors. Several junker cars in spaces where neighbors once parked causes tension and resistance to Oxford House.

• Encourage attendance at AA and Narcotics Anonymous, the largest and most successful programs for recovery in the world.

• Put no time limit on length of stay. Sober residents who pay rent, and whose behavior is reasonable can remain until they feel comfortable moving out.

• And most important of all, for the common good, there can be no leniency for those who drink or use drugs.

This system at the first two Oxford Houses had its glitches but was succeeding in an impressive way. If a person stopped by either house at noon it was unlikely there would be any residents home: they were working; the rent was paid; the house was orderly. In the evening we would drift home from work to share stories and eat, then usually everybody left for 12-step meetings. We were providing our own housing and the profound gift of understanding and caring for each other that provided the mysterious ingredients of sobriety.

Residents in the early Oxford Houses were often, at first, without jobs, without families to whom they could return, with overhanging legal problems, often without cars or the legal right to drive them, financially insolvent, without outside emotional support, and left with the poignant guilt of actions they had taken to damage their spouses, children and loved ones, and their careers.

Yet somehow with all the baggage from fractured families, financial insolvency, dates with judges, and intense internal shame, men in Oxford House developed a powerful common goal: to stay sober and help one another. It was that common goal, joined together, that made Oxford Houses work. The common goal was stronger than differences in race, age, geographic backgrounds, and the multiple social, family, economic, and psychological problems created by years of heavy drinking. We had witnessed addicted people who never stopped drinking or using drugs die or be jailed for long periods of time. We were brothers in our desire not to sink again into the shame and loneliness of active alcoholism, a progressive fatal disease.

Second from left, Paul Molloy; third from left, Jim Spellman; fifth from left, Bob Brown

We had a first anniversary party at a park in Silver Spring, Maryland. Only seven of us came, most if not all from the Fessenden house. It was a boost, looking ahead, because it's unusual to have a first anniversary without

expecting to have many more. I took a photo.

We determined that if Oxford were to expand our system, it should be codified and Molloy wrote what we were to call the Oxford House Manual.[6] It delineated how a house should be chartered and managed for current houses and for when the residents of the first two houses had moved on. It was clearly written for the future with "traditions" when we hardly had been around long enough to know what our traditions were.

The "SYSTEM" as defined in the Manual is: "a non-profit, corporation providing individual charters to recovering alcoholics who want to join together to form democratically-run and self-supported housing consistent with the Oxford House concept, system and traditions."

The traditions, published in the back of the Manual were:

I. Oxford House has as its primary purpose the provision of housing and rehabilitative support for the alcoholic who wants to stop drinking and stay stopped.

II. All Oxford Houses are run on a democratic basis. Our officers are but trusted servants serving continuous periods of no longer than six months in one office.

III. No member of an Oxford House is ever asked to leave without cause—a dismissal vote by the membership because of drinking, taking illicit drugs, non-payment of rent, or extreme behavior.

IV. Oxford House is not affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous organizationally or financially but Oxford House members realize that only active participation in Alcoholics Anonymous offers assurance of continued sobriety.

V. Each Oxford House should be autonomous except in matters affecting other Houses or Oxford House, Inc., as a whole.

VI. Each Oxford House should be financially self-supporting although Oxford House, Inc., may approve loans from either financially secure houses or a development fund in order to start new houses.

VII. Oxford House should remain forever non-professional relying upon democratic rule for the operation of its houses.

VIII. Propagation of the Oxford House, Inc., concept, system and traditions should always be conceived as public education rather than promotion. Principles should always be placed before personalities.

IX. Members who leave an Oxford House in good standing are encouraged to become associate members and offer friendship, support and example to newer members.

The traditions and the organizational suggestions that Molloy formulated, with updates, were to be used by many new Oxford Houses in the future.

The effort to piggy-back on AA's remarkable success by borrowing some of its language made me queasy, but AA never complained because it was their custom to have no opinion on outside issues.

As I mentioned, the winter of 1976-1977 was the coldest on the East Coast since before the founding of the republic.[7] Our house was so poorly insulated and seemed to always feel cold regardless of how much fuel we burned. But the freezing weather finally ended, the snow melted, and several unrelated events boosted Oxford House out of the winter blues.

More House Openings

Molloy bought a personal house for himself in Maryland and moved out of Oxford House. He was then instrumental in opening two new Oxford Houses in Maryland, one small house for men and one mixed for men and women (Brunett).

I had been president of both the Fidler Lane and Fessenden Houses, and president of the umbrella Oxford House, Inc. I was more than eager to move to an apartment, but didn't want to leave the members behind in the Fessenden house which was so marginal.

Huntington House

Scanning houses for rent in the Washington Post, I spotted a large mansion-like house at the corner of Connecticut Ave and Huntington Ave. in upper Northwest Washington. Lyle Henry, a house member, and I drove to the location. We gasped at the size and beauty of the house and the potential it had as an Oxford House. It was elegant. No one answered our knock, but the door was unlocked so we walked into the empty house for a quick look around.

Huntington House
Photo: J. O'Neill

The spacious residence would be perfect for an Oxford House. Its location near a city bus line, its proximity to grocery stores, drug stores, banking and potential work sites would be difficult to beat.

I convinced the owner, who held the house in the name of a children's trust, that we alcoholics would be good, long-term tenants and care for his property. I rented the house for $850 a month.[8]

We abandoned the Fessenden House and made the move. The Huntington House became an iconic Oxford House for at least 15 years—a place where we showed visitors that our houses could be rented in upscale neighborhoods, away from areas of high crime and visible alcohol and drug sales and use. No Oxford House member could walk into the Huntington House without a sense of pride about where he lived or without a stark epiphany that things can get better when he maintained long-term sobriety.

NIMBY trouble later developed around my lease and occupancy of the house that could have halted future expansion. I was to be even threatened with criminal prosecution. But in May 1977, the sun was shining and the wind was at our backs.

I lived in the Huntington House for two weeks until it was settled before making two big changes. I bought my first new car, a Buick that felt like a land yacht, better than the Chevrolet Malibu I had christened the *caveat emptor*. Also, I moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Bethesda, Maryland, in a complex that abutted the campus of the National Institutes of Health. The walk-in closet was about the size of my room in the Fessenden Oxford House.

A smarter person might at this point have focused more on work and relationships and less on houses for alcoholics, but I knew every person who lived in Oxford Houses those years and many years to come, and the bonds were strong. One bad lease, incident or legal conflict might have cost me what resources I had saved, but I trusted my companions on the bumpy road to sobriety and cheerfully signed leases and loaned money for security deposits and first-month rents. It was satisfying to be useful.

That fall a railroad lobbyist Molloy knew from Wilmington, Delaware, found a large, dated mansion in Wilmington that, if I remember correctly, had housed perhaps 30 or so people during the Vietnam War era. We eagerly leased it.

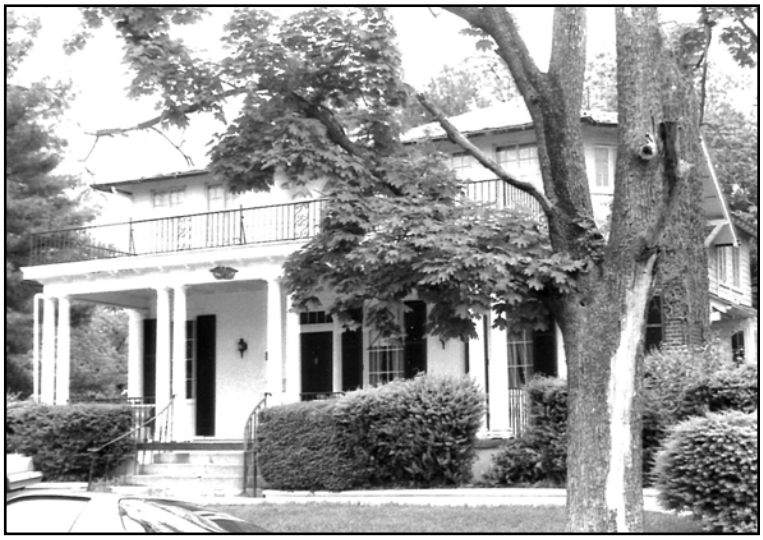
Northampton House

Six months after leasing the Huntington House, in November, 1977, I heard of another mansion-like house for rent just below Chevy Chase Circle in the same upscale section of Washington, D.C., about a mile from where top politicians, high-level military brass, Supreme Court justices and socialites play golf at the Chevy Chase Club. It was perfect for an Oxford House. The house, at Northampton St. and Connecticut Ave., had been vacant for a couple of months, probably because nobody was willing to take on such a large, multi-faceted dwelling. The house had a circular driveway in front and eight white pillars on the concrete front porch. Inside was a chandelier at the front of a wide hallway that ran the length of the first floor. Downstairs had five large common rooms plus a kitchen and half-bath. When new residents moved in they had a paneled library to the right of the entrance often used as a television room; left of the entrance was the living room with a TV, video recorder and working fireplace for which members

bought wood; a large kitchen, with two large refrigerators, a dining room and a joint office and den.

Upstairs there were seven bedrooms, three double and four single, each carpeted and wired for cable, and two baths. Many members installed private telephones. In the basement were three single rooms and two full baths, clothes washing machines and a weight room.

I leased the Chevy Chase house for $800 monthly, with an option for another year at the same price. Like the Huntington St. house, it would serve for decades as a showcase for Oxford Houses. It was across the street from the only shopping area in the vicinity where members in early recovery could buy everything they needed at a hardware store, two grocery stores, a large movie theater, drug store, restaurants, with a bus line moving in all directions.[9]



Northampton House
Photo: J. O'Neill

Ten months after moving into the Northampton House I mailed the owner a notice that we intended to renew the lease for another year. The letter said: "The Northampton house has proven an ideal place for members of our group to maintain sobriety, and we hope the lease arrangement has been mutually beneficial. The men living there have made rather extensive fix-up and repairs and there are no longer any leaks. They have also painted most of the outside of the house from the gutters down, and most of the inside, including the basement rooms. We have tentatively scheduled an open house on October 22 to celebrate the third anniversary of Oxford House in the Washington area, and hope you can stop by."[10]

It's difficult to discern the motives of newly sober alcoholics and drug addicts volunteering such broad-based improvements to somebody else's huge house. It would never be done if they felt it was merely a way station on the road to addictive doom. There is hardly another reasonable explanation except they were working together on the collective sober experiment that had saved their lives and they wanted it to look good for themselves and those who would follow.

In December 1977 we had six houses—three in Maryland, two in D.C. and one in Wilmington, Delaware—and felt we needed a communications vehicle to share news of other houses, expansion efforts, and encouragement for new houses.

The Grape Newsletter Begins

One Sunday, Molloy and I went to his offices in the congressional Rayburn House Office Building and typed and photocopied our first newsletter, The Grape, Vol.1, No. 1, Dec.17, 1977.[11]

The lead story of the Grape was a letter from the president of the new house in Wilmington, Delaware, saying how "amazed and delighted" he was with progress. The house was full with 11 members and a waiting list.

But there was ominous information in the letter saying there was a need to know how to handle people on welfare who receive $50 a month cash and food stamps, while the house had set the rent at $30 weekly. My memory is that the house kept accepting members on welfare from a state program and finances were inadequate. I stopped by to visit returning from a business trip to New York and was treated like an intruder. It was the only Oxford House I'm aware of in which members decided to game public assistance programs rather than get jobs, go to AA or NA, pay their own way, and have pride in helping one another stay sober. The house didn't make it, failing to take actions to flourish.

Every action we took was self-generated. We took pride in our independence and self-support. We never asked anybody for permission, we never coordinated with professionals at the cities, counties, states, or the professionals at the National Institutes of Health who were to publicize our success stories. We sought no publicity. We took no donations except used furniture. We loaned or donated money to other houses for first month rents or security deposits, or emergencies. While each Oxford House had to have a bank account to thrive, the umbrella corporation, Oxford House, Inc., didn't have a bank account for 13 years. We were volunteers, proud to have a part in such a vibrant, successful undertaking. We were beholden to nobody, free-wheeling, often ad hoc, with a creative can-do style. It was ideal for getting new houses started. Whoever found a suitable house could lease it, find house members and join the Oxford House family if they adopted our system and traditions.

Some houses, when well established, would establish requirements for admission like certain periods of sobriety or a job sufficient to handle rent. In the first houses many of us would not have met those requirements. I was sober zero days when I got into the Montgomery County halfway house. I sometimes accepted newly sober people on a hunch they really wanted to get better. Our actions were ad hoc, but they were working. Members were sorting out the problems and residents were getting sober together with pride.

The Chevy Chase house was filled with new members almost immediately, and like at other Oxford Houses, the phones would ring daily with desperate people seeking to live in a sober community. Oxford House had become well known in the 12-step communities, at alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers, halfway houses, hospitals and jails. The need was overwhelming and members were acutely aware of how lucky they were to live in an Oxford House. Over time some were able to move to another house, accept newcomers and make it an Oxford House, to share with others their good fortune of securing a bed, mutual support and enduring sobriety in an Oxford House.

National Attention Begins: Late 1977–1983

When we were two and one-half years old in December 1977, when we had seven houses, we agreed to a two-thirds-page story about our houses in the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) Information & Feature Service newsletter which was mailed to about 50,000 addiction professionals.[12] It had a photo of the stately Huntington Oxford House and told a bit about our system, as follows:

"An integral part of the Oxford House concept is that residents should be allowed to stay as long as they want to and the capacity should be expanded to accommodate newcomers. Thus, as the beds fill up in one house, if a waiting list of would-be residents develops, some of the charter members of the house may volunteer to move out and establish a new Oxford House."

"The rules of the house are few—the main one being don't drink. A resident found drinking, either on or off the premises, is asked to move out. Disruptive behavior or nonpayment of rent are the only other reasons for ousting residents."

"The houses provide a stable, democratically operated and supportive environment for living in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous."

The article was brief, but the consequences to us were huge. It listed my name and address as contact and hundreds of requests for more information arrived in the mail. It was obvious that there was a large need for low-cost transitional housing for alcoholics. But we were unable to adequately respond. We had full-time jobs and social lives.

We did make an effort to respond. We had hundreds of the Oxford House Manuals photocopied and prepared other material.[13] The photocopying and postage were a burden. For those who wanted more information and who seriously contemplated opening an Oxford House, we lacked a telephone where we could be reached consistently. We hadn't time or funds to visit potential houses or even a printed charter to award. We lacked the time and budget to travel to assist house startup or provide counsel in early months for new houses.

There are five examples of the requests for more information from the NIAAA article showing the scope of institutions seeking transitional housing for newly sober people in the attachment.[14]

Without a central office we received mail at different addresses: at our first Oxford House address, Fidler Lane in Silver Spring, Maryland; at the Huntington St. house in D.C.; at my apartment in Bethesda on Battery Lane; Molloy's house on Colesville Road in Silver Spring, Maryland; and later at my house in Kensington, Maryland. There was no organizational telephone

We may have lost two potential houses after the NIAAA newsletter for lack of means to visit. In my files is a letter I wrote on September 13, 1978, to a group in Havre, Montana, informing them that Oxford House had unanimously voted to grant them a charter and saying how delighted we are that "you are giving the Oxford House concept a start in Montana." I alerted the potential members to how important maintenance sobriety and fiscal probity were.

"We hope you have been able to secure a loan to tide you over until membership in the house picks up," I wrote. "Most of the houses in the Washington area have started with a debt of some sort for money borrowed to pay the first month's rent or security deposit or other expenses. This has usually been handled with a note and monthly payments made at no interest."

A member of the group wrote back six days later saying the house was treading water but couldn't catch up with $700 in initial expenses. He wanted a loan from us.[15]

Their approach was wrong on several matters. We suddenly learned they took in women members, which we would have had to veto. We didn't know if it was a responsible group and our loan and confidence would be rewarded.

If one of us had been able to hop on an airplane and spend a weekend with the group it might have cleared everything up. Maybe we would have loaned them money. Maybe they would have become a single sex house and been successful for decades. The group and I had kept missing each other's calls. We last heard from them October 11, 1978, saying they had evicted several men "for not living up to expectations."

There is another charter application in my files from seven men in Bangor, Maine, in March, 1979. I have little recollection of what transpired but we were unable to follow up in a meaningful way and no thriving Oxford House was developed there at that time.[16]

The responses solidified what we had already learned: the times between when alcoholics and drug addicts have their first serious exposures to AA and NA or finish their stints at rehabilitation centers and the time when they establish housing,

employment and community involvement are the most dangerous to their newfound sobriety—the role Oxford Houses were filling.

New Houses and Changing Houses

Capitol Hill

105 5th St. N.E., Washington, D.C.
Photo: J. O'Neill

On the home front, I found and leased another Oxford House at 105 5th St. N.E. in July 1978, five blocks from the Supreme Court building. It was a narrow four-level row house. The District of Columbia was in the midst of a crime wave and a neighbor of the new house was shot dead next door in a needless robbery soon after the house began. But the Capitol Hill area was always popular. The Oxford House there was thriving more than 15 years later.[17]

Brunett

We had been dealing with a troubled Oxford House since our early days. With Molloy's backing, Oxford House was able to lease a gorgeous house on a leafy, upscale street near the business section of Silver Spring, Maryland, in December, 1976, at 5901 Brunett Ave. We wanted to open a house for women, but were nervous about launching a women's house in such a large home, so we chose four men to move in with eight women, thinking that when the house was thriving the men would move to another Oxford House.

Nothing worked as we hoped. We heard of forgiveness for drinking instead of eviction; of women being dependent on men for household functions and repairs; and about in-house relationships which were toxic. Most dangerous to the survival of the house, the treasurer stole all the money and when questioned about its location developed amnesia. We didn't prosecute. The sober men were moved to all-male Oxford houses so the women's house could admit four more women and be an all women's house. Instead they admitted four more men.

Molloy had loaned the house $1,000 when they opened. He wrote me a letter about his loss.[18]

To solve the problem, the women who remained sober and true to the Oxford House traditions were moved to a house for women opened in Maryland and the house was converted to an all men's house. I loaned the men's house $1,000 for a second chance.

Successful women's houses later became a staple of Oxford House, but the Brunett house was to be the last mixed-sex house.

We took measures to ensure that no single person could abscond with all the house money. Internal controls were suggested for all houses, which included, at a minimum, two people signing checks and financial reporting.

Five months later the debt was repaid by the new all-men's house.[19] The house was functioning as it should. I was almost never shortchanged in loans I made to various Oxford Houses.

The saga of the Brunett house wasn't over. In July, 1980, the owners, who were in the foreign service, were returning to America and of course, wanted to return to their home. I didn't hear that the house was dissolving until late one afternoon after a couple of members had found other places to live and the others were frantically searching for housing. I feared Oxford House was contracting, with our best house in Maryland about to close and our best houses in Washington, D.C., under threat from the city bureaucracy.

Ingomar

In what may have been my best one-day service to Oxford House, I rose early the next morning to search the Washington Post for large houses for rent. My eyes went immediately to an ad for a house at 3807 Ingomar Street, not far from the Huntington and Chevy Chase houses. It described a large house and listed the address, but oddly, no telephone number.

Ingomar House circa 2024
Photo: G. Schwarz

So bright and early I drove to the house in the upscale northwest neighborhood. Inside were some of the current residents, who might have been graduate students. One let me have a quick walk-through and I knew we had to have that house. One resident gave me the telephone number of the owners in Michigan. Time seemed of the essence for such a magnificent house so I dashed to the nearby Huntington house and called.

The man who answered said he had been working with the National Institutes of Health. After I told him the Oxford House story, he said he would rent to us. I didn't know it then but I was talking to Frank Ochberg, a graduate of Harvard and Johns Hopkins Medical School, a psychiatrist who until 1979 had been associate director of the National Institute of Mental Health.[20] That afternoon I went by the house

and found two other groups there hoping to lease it. It felt like destiny that we were first.

For three years, from 1980 to about 1983 during which time we leased Ochberg's house at 3807 Ingomar, he was director of the Michigan Department of Mental Health.[21] Although available to us for only a short time, the house served its purpose in being a refuge for members from the Brunett house; Ingomar residents were to move out to open other Oxford Houses.

In 1979 I bought a brick house near Garrett Park, Maryland, with a terrific location between Connecticut Ave. and Rockville Pike, just outside the Washington Beltway. Molloy and his children helped me move on a Saturday. I was 37. It was the first house I ever owned. I was a happy man.

Were We Legal?

There were always problems as Oxford House was born and expanded. The next one was to be a near-death experience.

We knew that municipalities, counties, states, and homeowners associations can pass rules and laws limiting who can live in their midst. One common statute in many jurisdictions limited the number of unrelated people who could share a dwelling. Sometimes the number would be five or six, making an Oxford House unworkable in first-rate sections of some cities because of high rental costs. Cities could classify group homes with a higher numbers of residents as rooming houses, imposing many expensive regulations, or if they find out residences are occupied by alcoholics and drug-addicted people they may determine it's a treatment facility. This was true even if there was no treatment going on inside, except residents going to AA or NA meetings and, in a manner of speaking, treating themselves.

We were transitional housing cowboys with the attitude that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission, especially if we knew the answer was likely to be "no" in certain places.

We also knew that residents with different skin colors and behavioral backgrounds made people anxious in some neighborhoods. We had to weigh the risk of bureaucratic and NIMBY opposition versus what we felt was the right of people to live wherever they needed to be, to get sober and change their lives.

Our palatial houses in northwest Washington, on Huntington, Chevy Chase and Ingomar had bullseyes painted on them. The nation's capital had tens of thousands of professional people, many with important jobs. The city government's inclination was to be responsive to them, not to a group of recovering alcoholics and drug addicts.

I leased the Chevy Chase Oxford House on December 1, 1977. By June of 1979, the District of Columbia housing/zoning people had, without getting my permission,

inspected the house and called it a “community residence.” Homes with classifications like “community residence” or treatment facilities usually had onerous requirements like added construction and renovations that neither homeowners nor residents of an Oxford House could pay for, or need, or want.

I received a report from the Construction Inspection Section about the Northampton House that demanded: “Terminate basement stairs—top or bottom—with 45-minute fire rated partitions and self-closing fire door.” Another report demanded: “Fire protect all doors and window opening onto or within ten feet under outside fire escapes and exterior screened stairs.” Another said: “Fire-protect entire basement ceiling with approved material.”[22]

Even more ominous, the “composite notice of deficiencies” said in all capital letters, “This does not include any deficiencies which may be sent by the Housing Division.”

This was followed by reports from the Environmental Health Administration; Bureau of Occupational and Institutional Hygiene, and Zoning Inspection Branch. It warned that “…you can be referred for appropriate action without further notice to you.” I mused that the city might send the D.C. National Guard.

The city clearly wanted us out and a “for rent” sign in the yard.

Several months later I got a letter from the chief of the Zoning Inspection Branch citing the 1938 Zoning Act stating the circumstances under which a board can grant a zoning variance. But an occupancy permit would still be needed.[23]

In public relations, and maybe in other businesses, the term “tap dance” is used when you don’t have any answers to problems so you generate paper and make telephone calls to pretend you’re working toward solutions, hoping the situations improve in the future.

We had an officer from the D.C. Fire Department inspect both the Northampton and Huntington houses and give us an excellent grade. But once on the city radar, it seemed impossible to be anonymous again.

If a city could close us down where we had home-field advantage, other cities could do the same thing anywhere. Molloy always had the extravagant vision that members could stay at houses until they felt comfortable in their sobriety, and new Oxford Houses would open as they were needed. Yet we had grown to about nine houses and the future looked bleak.

The future got bleaker when I got a November 3, 1980, letter from the Department of Licenses, Investigations and Inspections Enforcement Unit saying I was “operating a rooming house without a valid certificate of occupancy” at the Huntington Oxford House.

The letter instructed me to appear at a hearing "before this matter is presented to the Law Enforcement Section of the Office of the Corporation Counsel for criminal prosecution."[24]

I didn't go to the hearing, of course. If they were to set a daily fine, or worse, charge me with a crime, I wanted them to have to find me first. My worst nightmare was that I would have to walk into the Oxford Houses in Washington and tell the members the houses were closing and everybody would have to move.

The Zoning Commission had mailed me an 84-page copy of the Community Residence Facilities Licensure Act of 1977. I didn't think we could possibly fit into any of the categories for a license.

In the tap dance arena, Molloy began corresponding with the city's deputy zoning administrator on his law firm letterhead.[25] [26] Molloy's assertion was that the Huntington Oxford House was an eleemosynary organization, meaning supported by charity because it was "non-profit, supported entirely by contributions, and provides refuge for the recovering alcoholic." In a note with an official application for an occupancy license, Molloy noted that "members make contributions sufficient to cover expenses." It was a tough position to defend that paying your own expenses is contributing to a charity.

I don't remember all the chapters of the back story, but Molloy had worked on both the Senate and House sides of Congress and met many people who knew how to intervene with the bureaucracies in their favor. The city knew its budget depended on the good will of Congress. I do remember Molloy mentioning a Vermont senator who probably helped, and I know Molloy had a connection at the Reagan White House.

I do remember well the day I got a call at work asking me to stop by the zoning department at the city. I had trepidation I would be walking into a legal, regulatory or even criminal morass, but the man sounded friendly.

At city hall the zoning official reached in a drawer pulling out a thick stack of papers he said were about Oxford Houses in northwest Washington. I assumed some were complaints from neighborhoods that would have preferred Oxford Houses locate in somebody else's back yard. He looked across the desk and declared: "I'm going to put these papers on the bottom of this pile of papers I have on my desk," sliding the Oxford House paperwork under his other papers. "They will stay there as long as you don't give us a reason to move them to the top."

Molloy had worked his magic by contacting political figures with leverage over the city. The city bureaucracy faded into the background and the zoning problems and anxieties were over, at least for a while in the District of Columbia.

We were six years old and we knew Oxford Houses with their model of long-term transitional housing were vital. Hundreds of alcoholics had gotten their first experiences of long-term sobriety in our houses. We heard again and again comments like: “The stay here saved my life.” “I couldn’t have stayed clean and sober without this house and the people here who helped me.”

But we felt stymied. Wherever we leased houses there would be zoning and regulatory problems that would threaten our continuation. Municipalities knew what others were doing. We couldn’t think of other places where we would be safe outside the nation’s capital, without always fighting rearguard attacks. We wouldn’t always have powerful allies to smooth the way or aid us with zoning issues. It was discouraging. The speed and enthusiasm for expansion diminished.

What did not diminish was the need. The phones rang daily at all our houses from many sources. When we were six years old we were known all around the D.C. area as a place where people were successful in sobriety. Those with tenuous sobriety were in dire need of places to live where peer pressure to stay sober was stronger than the pull of former neighborhoods where liquor stores, drug dealers, barrooms and addicted friends were abundant.

National Policy on Alcohol and Drugs

Thirty years after Prohibition ended in 1933 there was virtually no national policy on supporting or dealing with alcoholics and drug users. The problem had been handled on an ad hoc basis by law enforcement and a recovery system that provided services when there was money.

Ray Cloutier, formerly head of the Senate Republican Conference and consultant to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), summarized the state of federal policy in 1987. I borrow from his analysis.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s national awareness of alcohol and drug abuse was heightened with congressional hearings and legislation for research and recovery programs. Beneficial research was done at the NIAAA and National Institute on Drug Abuse to discover the scope of the problem and to determine what occurs in detoxification facilities and recovery homes. During this time corporations began employee assistance programs to confront and force workers to recover.

Before too many years the emphasis began to shift from the alcoholics and drug addicts to advancement of the recovery industry that grew up around the legislation.

A professional class of alcoholism and drug counselors began to set standards for who could work in treatment facilities, and these social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists began to exclude those without the same credentials. These people in most states used the political process to establish accreditation standards requiring

degreed professionals and the accreditation system became ossified. The need for professional degrees for treatment personnel led to high costs, thus limiting expansion.

National organizations in the field either became ineffective or captives of the recovery industry which created stricter standards for employment. Even the National Association of Halfway Houses adopted a policy that would require professionals before their houses could be accredited.

For example, old-line reasonably inexpensive rehabilitation houses like Seneca House near Washington, D.C., could no longer accept “third party” payments from insurance companies for stays there. That left few options but rehabilitation units with medical facilities which, though offering the same service, cost many times more.

The recovery industry seemed to have lost sight of the fact that by far the greatest rates of recovery occur in AA and NA, organizations that rely on experience rather than degrees and where the costs to society are zero. The best rehabilitation facility can do little more in 30 days than combat the denial common in addicted persons and introduce them to AA or NA. Real recovery comes from one addicted person understanding and caring about another. The good rehabilitation programs offer a safe, caring place while AA and NA are allowed to work.

The proliferation of high-cost rehabilitation has resulted in a two-tiered system of recovery—one for the haves and one for the have-nots. For the have-nots, the options were few.

Upscale rehabilitation hospitals in those days charged about $15,000 for 30-day stays —one-third for profit, one third for marketing, and one-third for treatment, Cloudier said in the 1980s.

In the meantime, the alcoholic or drug abuser without insurance or great personal wealth had no place to go. Unfortunately, a good percentage of substance abusers ended up without resources.

For the cost to house one alcoholic and drug abuser in a professional-run, high-cost program, a recovery home without professionals and minimum costs might provide a safe, healing environment for a dozen alcoholics for a long period of time. Any sane recovery system has to include those without insurance.

Chances of recovery are always greatly enhanced if the alcoholic or drug abuser can leave his or her normal environment for a time and have saturation exposure to AA or NA. This is especially true for the jobless, poor, and those without families who often lack the same motivation for recovery as those with families and jobs, and who often live in a worse environment for staying sober. Any national policy that doesn’t include these people isn’t addressing the whole problem.

Why Us?

It's interesting to speculate on why a group of penniless alcoholics and drug abusers established a replicable, spectacularly successful group of transitional recovery houses. Why wasn't it tried by institutions with money, connections, and big incentives? Why were there no houses that were democratically run and self-supporting, where treatment principles were learned in AA and NA and lived out in a community, where house members taught recovery to each other?

The incentives were there. Everyone in recovery businesses, and government agencies —local, state and federal—knew of the enormous need for safe, supportive islands of sobriety. Costs were enormous in health care as alcoholics were treated, relapsed, and hospitalized again. Many law enforcement expenses, including jails and prisons, were used for corralling active alcoholics.

It was well known that people in Alcoholics Anonymous freely go to extraordinary lengths to help one another stay clean and sober. But neither AA nor NA members had translated that fervor, imbedded in their cultures, to a system that could provide housing when new members were down and out, lacking a safe, supportive place to live in their early months or years of sobriety. So the newly sober often went to the "60 watt" rooms down the streets from the saloons of their destruction and, often, early deaths.

One of the reasons we were the first to open low-cost, self-supporting, alcohol and drug-free transitional housing may be that nobody trusted alcoholics to stay sober and successfully manage their own lives and destinies. AA was founded in 1935. This astute program of one alcoholic understanding and helping another spread rapidly into most every town and city in the country in 10-15 years. Meetings and what minor expenses were necessary were handled on a local level. On a national and international level, a low-cost office was run out of New York to publish a magazine, brochures and books, and to be available to help with policy as the organization developed. Yet for 20 years AA's founders were overseen by a board deliberately comprising more non-alcoholics than alcoholics.

In other words, the founders of AA didn't trust that alcoholics might not resume drinking, or go on ego-trips and otherwise mismanage the program. They didn't trust themselves. The book, *AA Comes of Age*, describes the AA International Convention in St. Louis in 1955 when the board of the fellowship was finally turned over to a majority of alcoholics.

If it took 20 years for AA members to trust themselves to run a recovery association, how much more concerning might it be to an organization or government considering opening self-supporting, democratically run houses for alcoholics, who generally had reputations for relapse and noncompliance. A government or well-intentioned

organization would be fearful of signing leases for upwards of $20,000, or, without strict rules and management, investing in property and turning it over to people who could drink, be financially irresponsible or otherwise cause chaos. NIMBY would arise and organizations might have to struggle with their sober peers, their neighbors, or constituents. There were no financial motivations for such high-risk ventures. At Oxford House our motivations were inspired by the words of AA: “Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.” Also, we didn’t have much to lose but much to gain, if successful.

Nobody had opened transitional houses for alcoholics before in any scaleable way. It would have to happen from lowly, defeated alcoholics like us. And all the circumstances for it to occur fell into our laps.

We inherited a furnished halfway house the county no longer wanted to support. All we had to do was pay the expenses and not drink. It sounds easy, and in many regards it was once we convinced ourselves we wouldn’t allow consumption of alcohol and banished those who violated that fundamental.

In the first house we had some members with prior successes in their lives: two lawyers, a newspaper reporter, an optician, a mechanic, and others not afraid to take responsibility.

We saw immediately that any expansion would be in rental property. It was quick, efficient and flexible. Find a house, talk the owner into leasing to us, scrounge furniture, residents appear, then repeat the cycle. People could find a house, admit alcoholics and former drug users and apply for an Oxford House charter if they agreed to abide by the Oxford House system: self supporting, democratically run, drug and alcohol free.

An umbrella corporation, Oxford House, Inc., had no bank account and no staff on the payroll. Simple, hassle free.

We had chips on our shoulders because the Montgomery County alcohol and drug personnel said we would soon be living in a “flop house.” That was strong motivation for those whose personalities may have tended toward the oppositional.

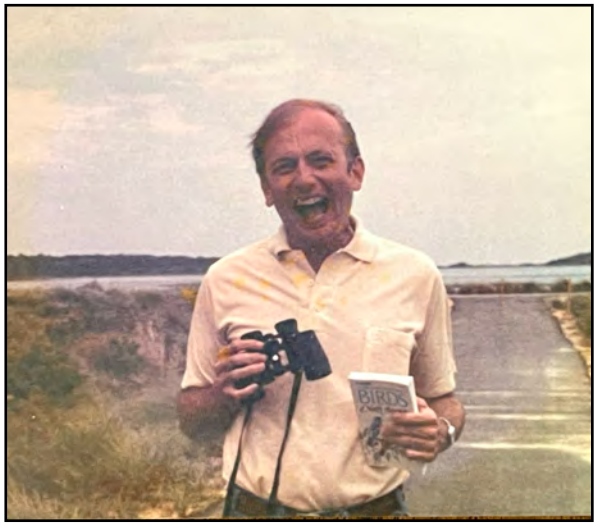
Molloy was a visionary with a strong personality that made people believe what others might think dubious. He wrote the charter explaining what we were and our intentions and we got incorporated as a not-for-profit in Maryland. People believe what’s on paper more easily than conversations that can be forgotten or misinterpreted. I was president of the organization and found and leased our flagship houses, solved problems and was present and conducted every significant meeting of the organization for years.

Maybe a major reason was that there was no money to be made from self supported houses, so recovery organizations and corporations had little interest.

Nine Years of Success, Then a Lull: 1984–1986

By 1984 Oxford House was nine years old, had about 11 houses and about 100 residents. It was an unmitigated success, in that many hundreds of men and women had an additional opportunity to gain a firm footing on sobriety living in community in our houses. The houses worked like we had hoped they would, paying their bills, evicting those who drank or used drugs, admitting newcomers, often with an 80-percent approval vote, becoming good neighbors, taking pride in a system for which they were the managers and trusted caretakers. The Oxford House system of self-reliance was known and embraced by the recovery community in the nation's capital and its medical and not-for-profit providers.

In government language, we were not a demonstration project. We had proven ourselves. Yet the ardor for expansion had diminished while the dread of NIMBY legal problems loomed.



John O'Neill, first weekend birding Chincoteague Island Virginia 1979

In the meantime, on a visit to Chincoteague Island off the Virginia coast several years earlier I had been smitten by avian life and began a quest to see every bird species possible on the continent, north of Mexico. In September 1984 I resigned my job, leased my house, hitched up a U-haul and drove to California where I bought 24 acres in the redwood country north of San Francisco. It overlooked a river canyon, fields, orchards and mountains beyond. I cleared some land, hired a contractor and his assistant and the three of us built a little home for me in a glorious setting. Then, with a lady friend, I birded California and other western states from the Pacific Northwest to the Mexican border, onshore and offshore, beaches, marshes, grasslands, mountains, and state and national parks.

While I lived in California, I returned to Maryland a couple of times on business and to check on my house there. I chanced to see Thomasina Borkman, a professor at Virginia's George Mason University, who was excited about Oxford Houses's self-funded communities of healing, leased and managed by newly sober alcoholic and drug addicts in Oxford Houses.

Borkman told me about a relatively new system of addiction recovery taking root in California that was called the social model. It had drop-in centers, halfway houses, and other community resources to combat alcoholism and drug addiction. The difference between the social model and other models, was that the alcoholics and drug addicts were the counselors and managers in the social model. It was outside the medical model of expensive hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and credentialed counselors that were such a drain on the finances of governments. Social model programs were available to people of all income levels. Professor Borkman said Oxford Houses were the purest social model of which she was aware.

By 1986, my Western United States birding hunger mostly satisfied after two years, I reflected on what next to do with my life. I couldn't think of a way to make a living identifying birds and wasn't interested in corporate America. After much contemplation I realized that Oxford House had been the most meaningful and successful adventure of my life.

Beginning of Focus on Expansion: 1987–1988

What if I returned to the Washington area and began searching for a way to expand Oxford Houses, to renew some of the fervor from our earlier years and find some financing to be able to get the organization moving again?

This probably wasn't a bright plan since NIMBY troubles probably awaited Oxford Houses in top neighborhoods except in Washington, D.C., where the city had backed off, and possibly Montgomery County, Maryland, where our houses thrived in peace. But, I thought, we had survived bureaucratic regulation before and might find ways again. I felt charitable foundations might be a good source of seed money to finance some more houses. If successful, I would make it, if possible, my life's work despite cloudy prospects because of NIMBY and bureaucratic obstacles.

Before leaving California, Professor Borkman suggested I go to the 11th Annual California Conference on Alcohol Problems in Clear Lake and meet some of the top government officials and providers who were promoting the social model, like Al Wright, head of alcohol programs and policy in Los Angeles. Hundreds of addiction professionals crowded the facility. I think I was the only one paying his or her own expenses.

After another seagoing birding trip to Monterey Bay, I sold my land and we drove across country to Maryland in late 1986 to see what adventures awaited, including to investigate the possibility of putting the Oxford House concept on the road.

Back in Maryland I found Oxford House in a lull with a house closed here or there and another opened. Nobody internally seemed to be paying much attention. Molloy was working at a law firm on some legislation. I began working part-time as a night editor at the Washington Times. I planned to work only about two nights a week, but the editors

often asked me to work more time. Also I was asked to write a twice monthly column on birds and birding.

We had hardly gotten my house in order when an invitation arrived asking me to be on a panel at the NIAAA on social model alcohol recovery.[27] I was asked because of connections I made in California explaining how Oxford House was born and how it worked and my friendship with Borkman, the George Mason University professor. Getting some recognition from one of the National Institutes of Health was a good start.

In 1987 I began research at the D.C. Foundation Center[28] looking for institutions that might support with grants an organization like Oxford House. During the days I would write foundation grant proposals and at night I would work at the newspaper.

I quickly learned that foundations were uninterested in adding new recipients to their philanthropies, especially for an alcohol recovery organization with no bank account, no budget history, and little public track record for the past dozen years. I volunteered to meet with them and to show them Oxford Houses and let them hear success stories. In return I usually got form letters thanking me for applying for a grant, complementing Oxford House for its work, and telling me Oxford House didn't meet their priorities.[29] [30]

I seemed to be getting more attention in California than the East Coast, speaking about Oxford Houses and the social model at the University of California in San Diego.[31] People I met in California began inviting me to carry the Oxford House message to their state.

Molloy's Chicago law firm, Isham Lincoln & Beale, was disintegrating, soon to go out of business. Molloy, searching for a livelihood, developed an idea he called Triple S[32] [33] which would be a human resources arm of the railroad industry dealing with addicted rail workers and truckers. It was months before the railroad industry finally rejected his proposal.

Through Molloy's contact with a former congressman from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, we were able to lease a house there that would be our first successful Oxford House outside the Washington, D.C., area. Driving back from Bethlehem one evening after helping establish the new house, I suggested to Molloy as strongly as I could that it might be possible to replicate Oxford Houses if we could somehow resurrect an old idea of his to find financial support and start a revolving fund so Oxford House residents could borrow enough to rent and open a house and pay it back so others could use it for the same purpose. I thought there might be a workaround for legal and bureaucratic tangles that could get us tossed out of towns and neighborhoods because of laws and regulations.

Molloy put his visionary and creative talents to work on ideas and potential ways to expand Oxford Houses. He was a wizard at organizational ideas and could function with little sleep and write with a fluid, powerful style attractive to power brokers and alcoholics in our houses looking for guidance. In March 1988 he produced an eight page paper called “Oxford House, a Concept Worth Expanding.”[34] [35] [36]

The U.S. Department of Labor Report (Five Sections)

In 1987, I was contacted by Ray Cloudier, whom I knew from the recovery world, who was working as a consultant to the assistant secretary for veterans’ employment and training at the U.S. Department of Labor. His focus was homeless veterans. He was familiar with Oxford House and I’m sure knew our houses would work as well for veterans as non-veterans since a significant portion of Oxford House members had been in the Armed Services.

He engaged me to do a study to tell the Oxford House history; to do research on the need for sober housing; to visit several houses to interview residents on how it works and its value to them; and to give a questionnaire to all Oxford House residents to ascertain: age, income, length of time sober, times and length of any jail term, length and occasions of prior homelessness, veterans’ status, race, and employment status.

We had known for 12 years that Oxford Houses were working but our knowledge was anecdotal. The study—“Transitional Homes for Homeless Veterans"—revealed the enormous value and need for Oxford Houses, and its inner workings of self-support, producing pride in those who began managing their own lives sober.[37]

As Principal Investigator for the federal study, I researched what others had written about the need for sober housing and I visited three houses, giving voice to residents’ experiences. I also developed the questionnaire sent to all 125 residents, with the results analyzed by William Spillane, Ph.D. The study showed how well self-sustaining, democratically run Oxford Houses work.

1. Excerpts from the Executive Summary

Oxford House is a “working model of a self-supporting, self-run alcohol and drug recovery program. The houses work for all ages, for all races, for those from all social and economic backgrounds, for men and for women, for those who have been homeless and for those who haven’t, for those with many achievements in the past and for those who have none, for veterans and non-veterans, for those addicted only to drugs or alcohol, and for those addicted to both alcohol and drugs.”

This examination in detail of three Oxford Houses is a “graphic case study of alcoholics and drug addicts who, when given a working model for operating a house and responsibility to make it work have successfully managed houses on their own and in

the process become re-socialized, employed and have gained self-respect and self-confidence."

The Oxford House model is readily expandable anywhere. "There has probably never been a lower cost method of recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction or to house the homeless." However, in terms of the study purpose, the report recommended that "transitional housing for those with alcohol and drug addiction be separate from housing for the non-addicted. Those with addictions would apply to Oxford House, Inc., for a charter, a method of operation and quality control that has been proven for over 12 years. A separate organization would be created to provide charters for the non-addicted and to be responsible for quality control."

2. Past Research

Much research had shown the need for sober, transitional housing if long-term survival and sobriety were to be achieved.

The report says: "Alcoholism treatment professionals have long recognized the 'revolving door' syndrome that traps people in a cycle of drinking, short-term treatment, and a return to drinking. This cycle is based, at least in part, on lack of adequate, affordable living environments that provide support for newly achieved sobriety."

In the study I quoted researchers who had studied what is needed for alcoholics in early recovery to remain sober before Oxford house was widely known:

Wrote Sue Korenbaum for the NIAAA in 1987: "Beside having an affordable place to live, alcoholics and drug abusers need to be away from the crime-ridden, rundown neighborhoods where drink and drug abuse are a way of life. They need a residence where sobriety is normal and drinking or drug abuse are strictly prohibited by their peers. In such an alcohol-free environment 'newer residents are able to see sober role models daily, and, by working with their housemates to achieve a harmonious living environment, they receive informal lessons on problem-solving, self-expression, self-respect, cooperation, giving, emotional support, and friendship'." (Sue Korenbaum, Gina Burney; "Program Planning for Alcohol-Free Living Centers"; Alcohol Health & Research World; NIAAA; Vol II., No. 3)

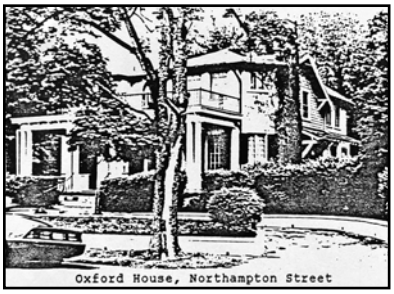
William Breakey of Johns Hopkins University reached similar findings in 1987: "Homeless substance abusers have long histories of maladaptive living and have developed lifestyles on the street that they can only change with great difficulty. Developing new patterns of adaptation and new skills, new friends and new habits are necessary if the person is to adapt successfully to a healthier lifestyle. This may be a very long process and in some cases, almost indefinite plans must be made for support, rehabilitation and housing. Such facilities are scarce in most places; for the homeless, they are generally inaccessible." (William R. Breakey, Johns Hopkins

University; “Clinical Services for Homeless Alcoholics: Implications of Recent Research and Experience”; 1987)

Researchers in California reached similar conclusions: “The lack of access to alcohol-free housing was identified by all alcohol program managers interviewed as the most critical of all problems facing homeless people in recovery programs in a 1987 study of the homeless in Los Angeles.” (Friedner D. Wittman, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation; “Observations on Alcohol Recovery Programs for Homeless People with Alcohol Problems in Downtown Los Angeles)

3. My Visits to Three Houses

I spent time at three Oxford Houses to interview members and see how they worked the Oxford House system. Remember that members can stay in any house as long as they want if they don’t drink and they pay their share of expenses. Of prime interest was how varied populations manage to live together in harmony, making sobriety and responsible new lives their primary purposes.


Oxford House, Northampton Street

Northampton House. At the Chevy Chase House, one of our two showcase houses in upper Northwest Washington, the weekly Monday night house meeting was considered so important residents wouldn’t admit a new house member who couldn’t attend. At the meeting prospective members are interviewed, house business and purchases are discussed, members report on cleanliness, rent due, jobs and job prospects, including helping new members find employment. Without the meeting tensions can build and fester over personality conflicts or neglected responsibilities to the house. The meeting was felt to be the key to harmonious living.

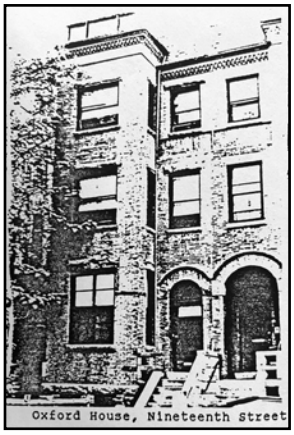
Prospective applicants must survive a lengthy interview process. Those who make it consider it a privilege to be accepted. “This feeling is reinforced when the new resident moves in and those in the house go out of their way to make him feel welcome. Old residents take him to AA and or NA meetings. They encourage him to get a job and help him find one if he can’t. It is explained to him that he is living in a good neighborhood and is expected to respect his neighbors. They tell him in a supportive way that he is on his own, but they will be keeping an eye on him.”

The house had 13 residents ages 21 to 62, average age 37. In 1987 eight were white and five were black. Occupations included a marble worker, housepainter, liquor store worker, post office worker, drywall installer, telephone company worker, dispatcher, building inspector, and an insurance specialist. None of the 13 residents had moved out in seven months. The landlord was so pleased with improvements that the rent hadn’t been raised in five years.

Several alcohol rehabilitation programs like the Veterans Administration, the Psychiatric Institute and the U.S. Post Office employee assistance program referred all those needing housing to Oxford Houses. There was seldom room for any of them. A resident estimated there were eight to fifteen calls weekly from hopeful residents, and the answers were usually sad: “Sorry we’re full.”

“I had run out of people who would help me,” said Robert, a 62-year-old World War II veteran and former college basketball player. “I knew if I drank I wouldn’t have any place to live. That’s why you got to have a rule that if you drink or drug you’re on the street immediately.”

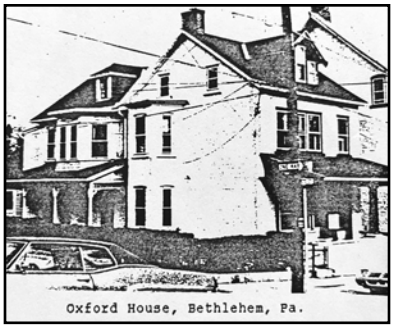
Bill, a 51-year-old post office worker, attributes the success of the house to peer pressure. “Most of us had never lived with people getting clean,” he said.”We had peer pressure to get alcohol and drugs, but never to stay clean. This place took me away from the friends I had and forced me to adapt—to stay clean.”


Oxford House, Nineteenth Street

Nineteenth Street. The second house I visited was on Nineteenth Street some 12 blocks north of the White House in an ethnically mixed neighborhood of whites, blacks and recent immigrants, mostly Hispanic. A three story duplex, it had three double bedrooms and a bath on each of two upper floors, and a double room, a single room, and a bath in the basement.

The 15 house members are about evenly divided between those whose drug of choice was alcohol and those who preferred other drugs. In the previous year one person was voted out for drinking, and two others left under “suspicious circumstances.”

The youngest resident was 24 and the oldest 49. Twelve were black and three white. Occupations included one on active military duty, a government worker, a mortician, two construction workers, two hospital workers, two restaurant workers, a counselor for the handicapped, a painter, a railroad conductor, a carpenter, a luggage store worker, a correctional center worker and a maintenance worker at a school.


Oxford House, Bethlehem, Pa.

Bethlehem. The third Oxford House I visited was in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. It had been the second major effort to launch a facility away from the close observations and influences of the Washington, D.C., houses. It was almost a failure from the outset because of a misunderstanding. Leased in the summer of 1987, local alcohol and drug facilities got the impression that potential residents needed to be sober four months to be eligible for residency in Oxford House. By four-months

sober potential applicants had found housing elsewhere and the house had too few residents to thrive economically.

The house members eventually realized there was no minimum amount of sobriety required for residency and the house reached its capacity of ten members. Six of the ten were veterans, one was black and nine white.

(*Note:* Some houses have adopted local rules requiring terms of sobriety before acceptance into a house. I never liked such requirements, knowing I would have been rejected, being one day sober.)

Steve, a twice-divorced father of two was the first resident. A former restaurant manager, service station operator, and real estate salesman, he also lived in a cabin in the woods without electricity for six years, worked when he had to, but was never sober. In Oxford House, he said, “It really helps me a lot knowing if I drink or use drugs, I’m out. I don’t have to make a decision; it’s made for me. It makes it easier to stay sober.”

Another resident, Don, a six-year Navy veteran, said he liked the freedom from the regimentation that exists in halfway houses. “We are not under the pressure of being under somebody’s thumb.”

4. Resident Survey

As part of the Department of Labor study I devised a questionnaire and took it to all 13 operating houses, met with members and asked them please to respond to the confidential questionnaire. Of the 125 residents, 96 submitted their data, a good response. Data were analyzed for the Department of Labor by William H. Spillane, PhD. Spillane’s analysis of the data and conclusions were heartwarming to those of us who had worked on developing Oxford Houses for 14 years.

Responders were:

87 percent male;

84 percent employed full or part-time;

29 percent were ages 18-29; 41 percent 29-39; and 30 percent older than 39.

Average monthly gross income was $1,040.

55 percent had no prior military service.

Residents were 56 percent caucasian and 40 percent black.

80 percent finished high school; 36 percent finished some college work.

79 percent had experienced at least one outpatient or residential treatment.

29 percent had been admitted to a treatment program three or more times.

39 percent were homeless at some point—20 percent for six months; 12 percent for a year.

15 percent were hospitalized or in jail just before entering Oxford House.

97 percent reported Oxford House was important to their continued sobriety.

45 percent attended both AA and NA meetings.

80 percent attend AA meetings on a weekly basis.

58 percent attend one or more NA meetings weekly.

Spillane noted that 45 percent of residents attend both AA and NA. “These are remarkable figures for a population not required by Oxford House rules to attend any meetings. No meetings are held in the houses.”

I noted that what was most remarkable was the atmosphere in the houses of alcoholics helping one another that contributed to members taking their lives and their sobriety so seriously when obviously in their earlier lives, as the survey found, they were so unable to abstain from alcohol and drugs.

5. Discussion of Adaptability

I asked Molloy to write the portion of the study dealing with the adaptability of the Oxford House system to houses for veterans. It was clear from our experience and the survey that success in Oxford Houses was not dependent on veterans’ status. Several veterans I interviewed thought military service, living and cooperating with others in close quarters, was an experience that helped them adapt to living in Oxford Houses.

Molloy made the case that groups of veterans could easily open Oxford Houses using our successful management, operational and financial methods. The only difference would be houses for veterans only rather than existing Oxford Houses which were for sober veterans and non-veterans.

However, in Oxford House the glue that held us together was staying sober, saving ourselves from desolate, empty, lonely lives and an early death, using the fellowship and wisdom of NA and AA and the caring and support of one another in our daily lives.

While a system of non-addicted veterans might successfully live together using veterans’ status and employment to hold them together, using federal funds to start houses, it would be very different from Oxford House.

I felt housing for non-addicted people, veterans or not, was an outside issue that could divert us from our primary purpose of opening new Oxford Houses as needed to help the suffering alcoholic.

Where We Stood in 1988

My honest appraisal of Oxford House, Inc., in early 1988 showed an organizational that was remarkably successful, but more aspirational than organized and ready to expand:

- We had never had a corporate-wide bank account or financial system.
- We were only volunteers, never having even one employee.
- We had 12 houses, not many more than we had a decade earlier. [38]
- We had never applied for a 501(C)(3) tax exempt status, a rudimentary first step in being able to solicit and accept contributions without taxes.
- We had no offices or officers, and no dedicated telephone.
- Our entreaties to foundations had been rejected.
- The fear of being crushed by NIMBY made us timorous.
- All our original houses in Maryland had closed.

Despite our members' incredible success in helping more than a thousand fellow alcoholics find a way to help themselves succeed in getting and staying sober, we were stuck.

Despite our impassioned rhetoric and pleas to AA and NA members, governments, and recovery businesses, they didn't have the organizational structures, funding or moxie to risk opening houses for recovering alcoholics who would manage their own houses. They were impressed with our self-support and self-management, but wanted us to open more houses to help them. But we had no organizational or financial means to do so.

It was against this backdrop that once he lost hope of landing an executive job with the railroad industry, Molloy turned his focus and remarkable organizational and writing skills toward an expansion of Oxford Houses. [See reference [34] on p. 34] He began to churn out papers touting the potential and workability of expanding Oxford Houses if a revolving fund could be established to lend to houses to help with upfront expenses, then have the loan repaid by Oxford House residents, then use the money anew to loan for other Oxford Houses to be launched.

Molloy approached members of Congress and their staffs with the audacious notion of making Oxford House a model for a nationwide expansion into every nook and cranny of America.

His selling points were:

- Oxford Houses were the missing link between early exposure to the recovery world and long-term sobriety.

• Oxford House had 13 years of successful self-help operation, having furnished housing and enhanced recovery for more than 1,000 people, for men and women, all with internally raised funds.

• The need and viability had been demonstrated by the Department of Labor study: Traditional Homes for Homeless Veterans.

• Oxford House operations could be easily adopted anywhere by others if start-up funds could be loaned and if experienced Oxford House residents visited for a while to help with any start-up glitches.

Congress Blesses Oxford House Expansion: Late 1988

Members of Congress obviously have varied motives for proposing to spend taxpayers' money for different projects. If it's a pet project, especially something new and untried, a member or members need to provide ample justification and persuasive skill to get bipartisan support of fellow committee members, then save it from the legislative pitfalls of the full House or Senate, then ensure it doesn't get axed when the two bodies reconcile differing versions. Members do favors for one another—you support my bill and I'll vote for yours. Sometimes they just like something new and exciting.

Molloy, who had been a Republican committee staffer in both the Senate and House, had worked closely with Rep. Edward Madigan of Illinois, ranking Republican on an influential House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, and was acquainted with Rep. Henry Waxman, the Democrat who was chairman of the House Health subcommittee.

In what must be about the most dazzling, incredible lobbying coup in Congressional history, Molloy, along with congressmen friends and their staffs, agreed on a nationwide government-supported and financed expansion of transitional recovery houses. A revolving fund for start-up would be required in all 50 states. The key: houses had to be identical to Oxford Houses in methods of operation.

Five million dollars was appropriated for each state to set up a $100,000 revolving fund, which would be loaned in $4,000 increments to groups to establish Oxford Houses or Oxford House duplicates.

It was extraordinary—a home run out of the park when President Ronald Reagan signed the act on November, 18,1988. Where I had struggled, hoping to open a few houses, Molloy got a provision into the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 that would mean Oxford House would be known in every state. Individuals and groups in every town and city in the United States could borrow money to open Oxford Houses. And they could do it with the blessing and encouragement of the U.S. Congress. Our little, disorganized transitional housing organization was about to change radically. A small successful, but nearly unknown, cluster of transitional recovery houses in northwest

Washington, D.C., with no corporate bank account, no offices, no corporate officers, little in the way of official records, that never had an employee, that was still in the process of attaining its 501(c)(3) tax exempt status,[39] and that had only one newly opened house outside the D.C. area, would become beneficiary of a remarkable piece of lobbying and special interest legislation that would astound even the most connected and influential of Washington insiders.

Doubtless there have been lobbying efforts in Congress that have led to far more spending, or tax breaks for the favored, but to create a whole new complex national program based on little but creative organizational thinking and aspiration still dumbfounds me.

Alcohol and drug abuse directors in all fifty states, most of whom probably had never heard of Oxford House, were suddenly instructed by the U.S. Congress to establish a $100,000 revolving fund to open self-supporting, democratically run, transitional recovery houses using the exact Oxford House model. Funds of $4,000 would be loaned for security deposit and first month rent to open Oxford Houses or Oxford House clones, whose members would pay it back so it would be available for others to repeat the process.

Further, state alcohol and drug programs that failed to establish revolving funds would lose their yearly appropriations from Uncle Sam for their usual functions and programs.

State reactions were mixed. Some resented intrusion and were dubious about results. Others that had struggled mightily to find a way to house people with alcohol and drug problems were enthused to give Oxford Houses a try.

We at Oxford House were overjoyed. I was on cloud nine. When the Congressional Record of the proceedings was published on November 10, 1988, I was pleased to see the portion of the study I headed for the U.S. Department of Labor about life in the three Oxford Houses was included as motivation for passage.[40]

Expansion Challenges

Two roadblocks were restricting the expansion of Oxford Houses. The first was that we were a tiny organization that was mostly unknown and lacked the money and personnel to provide technical assistance where we were so badly needed. In one gigantic step with the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 money from the federal treasury was to be available nationwide. And whether they were ready or not, every government alcohol and drug abuse program in the United States would soon be aware of Oxford Houses, how they work, and how they could provide housing for addicts on their own.

The second mountainous obstacle was NIMBY. We had seen again and again that neighbors in parts of towns and cities were made uncomfortable by alcoholics and

drug abusers moving into their neighborhoods and they demanded their elected officials use existing zoning laws to get us ousted.

Unknown to us, moving a few months earlier in the same Congress was the solution to our NIMBY problems that so often vexed us when we opened other houses: the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988.

The earlier Fair House Act of 1968 made it illegal to discriminate in sale and rental of housing based on race, sex, national origin.

The updated 1988 Act vastly expanded the earlier statute making it unlawful to discriminate against people with disabilities. As the Mental Health Law Project said: "Congress made it unlawful for public and private entities to discriminate against people with disabilities in the sale, rental or advertising of dwellings, in the provision of brokerage services, in the availability of residential real-estate transactions, in the implementation of land-use and zoning laws and in the enforcement of restrictive contracts and deeds."

The analysis sums it up with this powerful sentence: "This expansive law reaches every housing practice that segregates people with disabilities from the communities or otherwise limits their choices to live where they please."[41] All regulatory and discriminatory objections to Oxford House locating facilities wherever we wished would be illegal. Recovering alcoholics and drug abusers fall under the umbrella of disabled. This means that recovering alcoholics have to be treated like a family and no jurisdiction would limit family size.

It was a time for rejoicing at Oxford House. It would have been virtually impossible for us to write a script with better outcomes than the bills passed by Congress in 1988.

Many cities and counties would try to uphold their old zoning laws like those that limited the number of unrelated people who can share a dwelling, but the law was clear that recovering alcoholics were disabled as defined by the statute, and the law was on our side. The issue was settled for good in 1995 in the case of *City of Edmonds, Washington v. Oxford House, Inc.,* when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 6-3 that recovering drug and alcohol addicts are protected under the Fair Housing Act's handicapped provisions.[42] [43]

How times had changed. I remembered being summoned to the office of a zoning official of the District of Columbia government concerning zoning violations, thinking I might be fined or charged criminally. He had a small office with a metal desk. Suddenly Molloy and I were invited to the office of the chief of staff of the giant Department of Health and Human Services. The office had a conversation area with leather furniture, behind which were a giant wooden desk and flags, and a window with a scenic view. We met with a Federal agency head in Rockville, Maryland, whose name I forget. He had similar quarters. They offered coffee or soft drinks. We gave Dr. Ian Macdonald, the

President's "drug tsar," a tour of an Oxford House. He was to become a big booster of Oxford House.

We were the hot new commodity and people wanted to see and hear from us. On December 1, 1988, Molloy and I flew to Palm Springs, California, to brief the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (NASADAD). We were met at the airport with the hotel's Rolls Royce and delivered to suites with marble bathrooms. The next day we addressed all 50 state alcohol and drug director about setting up revolving funds to open Oxford Houses. Around 11:00 one evening while we were there, a Palm Springs minor earthquake woke me. It rattled the room a bit and something fell off a desk. The earth had truly shaken for Oxford House.

As we were preparing to move from a tiny, localized non-profit to a national program, there was much work to be done. We needed to produce written material explaining our methods of operation; we needed to find and prepare our residents and alumni to travel to states to provide technical assistance; we needed to respond to the multitude of inquiries about Oxford House; we needed funding to establish some sort of central office where we could operate.

Molloy in a great burst of activity began writing proposals to government agencies for funding, and put down on paper an organizational and staffing chart, all of it speculative. He told me I would be head of the Oxford House Service Board with multiple responsibilities.

The Rest of the Story: 1989–1991

My first misgivings with the direction Molloy was heading in 1988 at the beginning of the expansion came because he was developing a top-down system. He began signing correspondence, "Chief Executive Officer." On July 20,1988, Molloy told the Oxford House Board that he needed to have power of attorney to constitute contracts on behalf of Oxford House, Inc., since the corporation had no officers. The Board agreed and I witnessed the document.[44]

I suggested the organization needed a fully functioning Board of Directors. And further, I told Molloy that if he wanted to be called Chief Executive Officer he would need to be selected by the Board, not be self-appointed. I don't need the board, Molloy told me.

There had originally been an Oxford House Board consisting of the presidents of each house, but the president of each house changed every six months. As reported in the Oxford Grape of November 1988 [45] when the expansion began, that system became unwieldy and the old Board agreed to a restructure for one year under an Interim Board consisting of three residents of the first Oxford House—myself, Molloy, and Whit Holden "plus three members selected by those living in Oxford Houses and one member from the alumni group." After a year, a board would be elected to replace the

Interim Board. The new system of Board selection as codified in the October 26, 1987, and November 17, 1988, by-laws were confusing. The interim board met only once in a year. When the newly configured Board was finally constituted, it was ignored. [46] [47]

At some point, Molloy told me that the directors selected by the houses in distant states wouldn't know what's going on, and Oxford House could hire local directors if they disagreed with our system.

I didn't intend to be negative about Molloy's planning. We had built Oxford House together over 13 years and had never clashed on anything substantive. I obviously knew it needed to become organized and complex. I lacked the connections and charisma to head such an effort and Molloy was the obvious person to establish the new structure and manage Oxford House, Inc. The Board would have elected him to head the corporation if he asked, and I would have agreed, and they could have set some boundaries on him as is customary, but he didn't ask.

In addition to the above, I was concerned when in the "Oxford House Business Plan 1989" Molloy listed his salary-to-be at $168,000 "based on a year of nearly full time Oxford House work without compensation."

He listed my salary-to-be at $120,000, again based on "a year of nearly full time Oxford House work without compensation." Others would be paid lesser sums.

I told Molloy I thought potential salaries like his and mine would cause nothing but resentment internally and with members of Congress who passed our bill who made smaller salaries than those projected for us. And certainly jaundiced eyes would be cast by heads of federal agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services, which managed over a hundred thousand people and millions of dollars, and top executives of the National Institutes of Health who likewise were paid less than Molloy was proposing for us.

Molloy's response to me was: "I'm worth it." End of conversation.

There was another assertion in the Three-Year Business Plan for Oxford House, Inc., that I thought could be the Achilles heel in the funding competition for federal grants. Molloy's plan says: "The 13-year history of OHI in chartering self-supported recovery houses demonstrates that the relapse rate among residents is 2-3 times less than the rate among substance abusers who have been through a detoxification program followed by traditional after-care." Molloy said, "Figures like these led Congressman Edward Madigan (R-Ill.) and Henry Waxman (D.Calif) to approach OHI in drafting the Public Health Services Act that required states to establish Oxford-friendly revolving funds lest they lose their alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment funding".

Molloy had also been telling potential funders that 80 percent of Oxford House residents stayed sober. In the political world anything is true if you can get people to

believe it. It could not possibly work among governmental funders like the Institutes of Health because employees there went through rigorous academic or medical training where proof of research and peer review were crucial. If they were to ask Oxford House for research results on which the organization based lengths-of-sobriety claims, the best we could do was, like the schoolboy who, failing to do his homework, says the dog ate it. It certainly stood to reason that Oxford House residents had better sobriety outcomes than others who didn't live in a sober house, maybe two to three times, but numerical claims were fictional because nobody had ever done any research on the subject. Such research would have been complex, probably require years to conduct and be expensive.

When I argued vigorously that we should say claims of length of sobriety were purely anecdotal, Molloy told me we had to have something to sell.

Molloy frequently told people we had more Oxford Houses than we did. His reasoning was that we would open more in the not-distant future.

I argued that Oxford House was doing a splendid job as it was and there was no reason to embellish it, especially if it could hurt our reputation.

Molloy convinced a former colleague who had worked for a while with him at the House Commerce Committee, Charles van der Burgh, to join him in the effort to apply for grants and respond to requests for proposal. Van der Burgh's business had included formulating federal proposals, a complex and exacting process.

Molloy, using the outstanding success of Oxford House, began to apply for grants for Oxford House from states, the federal government, cities and foundations. Perhaps one reason he told me he didn't need a functioning Board of Directors was because, in a startling development, he also began applying for funding from the federal government in the name of J. Paul Molloy Associates, a personal offshoot of Oxford House, Inc.[48] I was never told about this potential business, but on one potential employment chart I was listed as a J. Paul Molloy associate, as were a number of others, most of whom had never lived in an Oxford House. The business was clearly designed as a consulting firm to solicit funding based on the success of Oxford House. I felt as if the good, selfless work of residents in achieving sobriety and opening new Oxford Houses for others was being used without their knowledge. And it was being done without the guidance of a board of directors or any oversight or consensus of house members or alumni.

For Oxford House, Inc., Molloy had on paper set up an organizational structure and assigned personnel to various functions.

Molloy named me to the job of director of the Oxford House Service Board, to run the core of the development and day-to-day operations of the organization. My tasks, as listed in Molloy's "1988 Oxford House, Inc. Development Plan"[49] were to:

1. Maintain an office to provide central coordination among Oxford Houses.
2. Answer correspondence and inquiries about Oxford House.
3. Prepare, edit and print Oxford House newsletter, the “Oxford Grape.”
4. Seek applicants for new Oxford House charters.
5. Assist new charter grantees in getting their new Oxford Houses started.
6. Coordinate the quality control procedures of Oxford House, Inc.

Further, in a “Business Plan for the Initiation, Development, and Establishment of a Sunset Program,” February 1989, Molloy wrote that the Oxford House Service Board (OHSB), which I was to head: “oversees the entire OHI program and administers four delivery functions described above. It is the repository of the Oxford House Concept (the principles underlying the experience of self-supporting recovery houses), and the traditions of successful operations. OHSB is also the provider of public information services (public relations, technical assistance and hotline.)”[50]

I was to be full-time director because, Molloy wrote, “John knows the start-up and operating experiences of every Oxford House that has been started.” That sentence was true, but nothing happened. Molloy never discussed with me how a Service Board could occur: where it would be located, get its equipment, get its staff. I was getting queasy about the operation going on in Molloy’s basement, concerned about the integrity of an organization with a self-appointed CEO, inflated salary expectations, and mythical recovery claims.

Molloy also proposed I direct an Oxford House Training Institute for people who would visit states to start the first Oxford Houses there.[51]

So I kept doing Oxford House work from my home, sometimes using the title Director of the Oxford House Service Board.

I had no desire to be oppositional, hoping the system Molloy was establishing would settle down with time and Oxford House would again be an open, cooperative, democratic venture. It was important that there be no acrimony at the national level because Oxford House provided such an important link between early treatment and primary exposure to AA and the perilous months before the addicted people get a job and get back on their feet sufficient to live independent lives without alcohol. Lives were being saved, families reunited, jobs taken and salaries earned. The concept was expanding on a national level and it filled me with joy, despite my concerns.

Oxford House and AA

Because AA has no outside affiliations, Oxford House was not part of AA, but it was inextricably intertwined with it. AA Steps and Traditions were the lifeblood of Oxford House. AA principles are included in all the early Oxford House literature. Our limited data showed that the average Oxford House resident attended six or seven AA or NA meetings weekly. The AA Steps are where we learned to stay sober a step and a day at

a time, and the Traditions are how we kept the fellowship unified, viable, based on spiritual principles and worthy of expanding.

Several of AA's Traditions touch on leadership and how leaders behave, and I believed they had special pertinence to what was going on when Oxford House was expanding in 1988.

Tradition two says: "For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern."

Tradition six reads: "An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose."

AA and NA principles form the bedrock of Oxford House literature. It might best be said in a promotional flyer Molloy wrote after the Congressional act leading to Oxford House expansion: "The organization is patterned after AA, and governance of the organization is through the development of consensus or group conscience."[52]

I was seeing little of consensus or group conscience developing in the governance of the Oxford House organization at the beginning of the expansion.

My Efforts to Continue in Oxford House

During 1988 and1989, my spirits were buoyed by two unexpected letters. The first was from the Veterans Administration in Washington, D.C., to me on April 28, 1988. The program directors wrote: "We have noticed that many veterans from our program, Veterans Administration Narcotic and Alcohol Treatment Association, have done extremely well when they have been able to find a placement in an Oxford House following discharge."[53]

The second, dated February 1989, was from the Crawford Foundation in Easton, Maryland, which we didn't know existed. It had based its transitional house almost exactly on the Oxford House system, and was successful.[54] "Crawford House is patterned after the outstandingly successful Oxford Homes of Washington, D.C."

Despite my concerns those years, I continued working for Oxford House from my home happily doing a number of routine and promotional tasks, staying in touch with and occasionally working with Molloy and his operation.

I had made friends in the recovery world at strategy meetings in California in 1986 and renewed them. I made presentations promoting Oxford House in Boston [55]; Atlanta [56]; Kansas City; Anchorage, Alaska; Columbia, South Carolina; San Diego [57]; Los Angeles; and many appearances on federal panels in Washington, D.C.[58] [59] [60]

I went to Atlanta to head another federal study for the NIAAA of an organization that used HUD housing as transitional sober dwellings.[61]

One day in 1988, I stopped by Molloy's shop and realized they needed photos of the 18 local Oxford Houses. I spent a day photographing the houses for a document called Good Neighbors in Good Neighborhoods.[62]

Molloy and I were invited to have breakfast with Mark Shields, a well-known political columnist and PBS commentator, at Joe & Moe's expense account restaurant on May 2, 1988. Shields was the ultimate D.C. insider and he quizzed Molloy about his drinking life and afterward. He probably was assessing Molloy for a story in the *Washington Post*, which developed into a segment on *60 Minutes*.

As our opening of new houses and promotional work increased, and especially after the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, Oxford House was besieged with inquiries about our successes and our system. Much of that correspondence fell to me. Examples of this correspondence included Joe Davidson of the *Wall Street Journal* [63]; Jerry Jacobs of Ford Edison Assembly Plant [64]; Friedner D. Wittman, Editor, R.O.W. Sciences, Inc.[65]; Chris Retan, Aletheia House, Birmingham, Alabama [66]; James Peluso, Deputy Director, Division of Veterans' Affairs, State of New York [67]; Committee, Study on Treatment of Alcohol Problems, National Academy of Sciences [68]; Michael Deaver [69]; Dave Reidy, Public Health Service, Cleveland, Ohio [70]; Jean S. Hartsock, Program Director, The Next Step [71]; Barry McCabe, Director, Lagos House, Tacoma, Washington [72]; and Roland Kreager, FreeStore/FoodBank, Cincinnati, Ohio.[73]

I looked at my files and saw I had personally leased for ten years our two oldest and most iconic Oxford Houses, at Northampton and Connecticut Avenue, and at Huntington and Connecticut Avenue, both in Northwest Washington, D.C. I wrote letters to the houses congratulating them on their decades of service to recovering addicts.[74]

During 1988 and 1989 as Oxford House legislation sped toward the finish line, I was active with Oxford House meetings, filing my bird columns for the Washington Times, conferring with Catholic University School of Social Work on potential joint ventures, and representing Oxford House at Federal programs. I found several houses for Oxford House [75] and Jack S. would show up for the closings.

Going to Kansas City

I traveled to Kansas City, Missouri, in June 1989 to seek the first Oxford House west of the Mississippi. The venture was slow and painful. Rental properties were hard to locate in a city with reasonable ownership prices. I discovered a convent that was abandoned by the nuns. It had a big kitchen and little cells for each nun with a sink, a toilet and bed. It would have been ideal for an Oxford House, giving each resident a

little privacy, but not enough space to isolate. I told the representative from the diocese on my first visit I wanted to rent it and I'd do some due diligence later. He demurred, saying he needed approval from upstairs. The same dance occurred again and again, until I realized I might have to have a conclave with the Pope to get permission to rent the former convent. Finally I gave him a deadline of one more day. He couldn't produce and the potential deal was kaput. A week of my time had been wasted. I eventually found a large, ideal house with beveled glass on the front door and a short walk to a large center of employment.

In September, I989, I was in South Carolina, sharing the Oxford House story with groups of potential Oxford House developers in Charleston, Columbia, and Greenville.

Go West Young Man

In September 1988, with revolving loan funds soon to be available and the tacit federal blessing for Oxford House to expand, I looked West where I had been so well received in 1986 at the 11th annual California Conference on Alcohol Problems. Substance abuse professionals in the nation's most populous state had shown a strong interest in social model housing.

I wrote Al Wright, head of Los Angeles County Alcohol Programs [76] suggesting it would be an ideal time for Oxford House to work with Los Angeles County to start low-cost transitional, sober houses like we had done in the East.

The large West Coast cities were eager to get started. I was invited to present at a national conference on Social Model at the University of California, San Diego, in February, 1989. Afterward, I received a letter from Bruce Ault, chairperson of the Commission on Alcoholism, County of Los Angeles, who had attended the San Diego conference, expressing a strong interest in Oxford House.[77] I responded to Ault about our willingness to open houses in Los Angeles County, which at the time had about nine million residents.[78]

I was to speak at several more conferences at University of California, San Diego.

The Los Angeles Commission on Alcoholism invited me to present for a couple of hours to the top alcohol and drug providers in the county on April 13, 1989, on Implementing Self-Supporting Recovery Facilities; the Oxford House Experience.[79] The event was at the Arboretum, an open-sided building, on a beautiful spring day. As my talk got underway a peacock wandered into the rear and exploded with the loudest bird shriek I've ever heard. Later I was told peacocks can be used in place of watch dogs. Nonetheless Los Angeles was sold on the Oxford House concept. I had lunch with Los Angeles recovery officials, then rode with Al Wright, head of alcohol programs in Los Angeles, to San Diego for the beginning of another presentation at UCSD.

Both San Diego and Los Angeles asked me for informal proposals to get the process started. I had visions of clusters of Oxford Houses up the California coast.

Attached is an undated, informal proposal to Los Angeles [80] by which I would establish 10 Oxford Houses in a year.

In about the same time frame, May 1989, I also sent a proposal to Robert Reynolds, deputy director of Alcohol Services in San Diego. He had asked for an informal proposal with some tentative cost figures. I proposed that I move there and, with a colleague, open six Oxford Houses in six months.[81]

In August, 1989, Los Angeles County alcohol officials had me visit for a week to meet senior staff and look in on their programs, presumably in preparation for a formal agreement to open Oxford Houses.

I was in communication with other entities up the California coast, including Santa Clara County. [82]

In June, 1989, I also spent a week with the Sun Street Centers in Salinas, California, and they likewise were enthused about opening Oxford Houses.[83]

Back in Maryland, I decided I would open houses on my own rather than deal with Molloy's operation. I would apply for Oxford House charters as houses developed on the West Coast, but absent myself from day-to-day operations in the East.

Reasons I Backed Away in 1989

In September 1989, I wrote the Board a six page letter explaining my reasons for backing away from the D.C. operation.[84]

As mentioned above, after the Anti-Drug Act was passed, Molloy set up the bones of a consulting firm called J. Paul Molloy Associates to contract with the Department of Health and Human Services to provide printed material, audio-visual aids, and data on recovery in Oxford House. The company would be owned by Molloy and Charles van der Burgh, a former Capitol Hill associate of Molloy. [See reference [48] on page. 46]

In an earlier personnel chart I found Molloy had listed me as a J. Paul Molloy associate without my knowledge. I told Molloy on the way to a meeting I wasn't going to be a J. Paul Molloy associate or any other associate. Oxford House didn't work that way. It was created to establish houses for recovery, not to extract money from federal contracts.

I remained concerned that salary figures in proposals to the federal government were inflated and Molloy claiming to be CEO could cause trouble with contracts. Also length-of-sobriety claims couldn't be verified.

I wrote: “It was clear to me that since Paul’s contacts led to passage of the amendment to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, he considered Oxford House a personal kingdom where he reigned supreme. I was the nearest thing around to a ‘group conscience’ and he wouldn’t listen to me about anything.”

Molloy had made another proposal to HHS for $4.5 million to fund Oxford House expansion. I pointed out in my letter that the proposed salaries for himself and me were higher than Congressmen were making. The CEO title is from the grandiose corporate world and is usually associated with for-profit companies like those in the Fortune 500. Executive Directors directed recovery organizations, not CEOs.

When I confronted him about appointing himself chief executive officer, he said I had an ego problem. When I told him I felt important decisions should be made by a group conscience, he said I wasn’t a team player.

I noted when I tried to discuss other directions with him he accused me of various character defects which evidently I managed to conceal during the 13-years we had worked together before.

I wrote, “Paul also accused me of wanting to keep Oxford House small, with just the two of us opening houses like the old days.” That suggestion was idiotic to me. I had tried with steady, earnest and energetic effort for years to expand Oxford House.

But despite my letter to the Board, I found my interactions with Oxford House in D.C. were far from over.

Reasons I Was Back In 1990

What’s a Board of Directors?

About six months after my letter to the Board, I was peacefully sitting in my home office one afternoon in the spring of 1990 when the Oxford House Board chairman called me to ask for help. He said the Board had heard of substantial sums of money moving through Oxford House and they were denied access to information. Molloy refused to deal with the Board, he said. When asked for information, Molloy would threaten to quit. Another time Molloy said if the Board could run the organization better than he could, he would withdraw and leave it with them.

The Board asked me to meet with them and tell them what functions and authorities a corporate board had, the role of bylaws, and how they could find out what was happening with the organization, and participate. I agreed, not knowing I was walking into a hornet’s nest.

Once the Board found out its responsibilities and authority, there was a scramble to learn what was happening with Oxford House. They were more than a little annoyed they had been deprived of the direction and actions of the organization. Rather than a group conscience, the actions had been done without their knowledge.

In my files are contemporary minutes of two Board meetings, one dated June 19, 1990,[85] and another undated but with the heading MINUTES: PART II.[86] Board members scolded Molloy and established committees to study management practices, housing endeavors, and finance, including an audit.

The Board minutes included:

• A board member asked Molloy why the Board did not participate as bylaws directed. Molloy said he "was too busy with the expansion of the system and that he was sorry about not involving the Board."

• Ed Walker, a Board member, asked O'Neill about procedures of other boards and John replied "that the board could decide to do whatever it wanted."

• Board member Bryan gave Jim (an accountant) copies of reports the Board had been given by Molloy. The accountant said that type of report is "not indicative of the financial condition of the organization."

• There was discussion of the type of financial disclosure that would be required, and there was unanimous agreement for motion by Board member Andrea Griffin to establish a Management Committee.

Soon the Management Committee demanded accountability. Four days after the Board meeting they recommended the bylaws be given to an attorney to determine the legality of actions taken and contracts entered into by Molloy and to advise on any necessary remedial action.

The Committee also recommended the Board elect a corporate management team, including an executive director and other officers, determine what their total compensation was to be, and outline their responsibilities and duties.

The Management Committee "wants a month-by-month salary history of Oxford House employees from the period July 1, 1989, to June 30, 1990, including salary, honoraria, consulting fees, and all other compensation connected in any way with Oxford House.[87]

Surfacing of Methadone Proposal

Based on what it was learning, the Board dropped a hammer on July 5, 1990, when it revoked the power of attorney executed to Molloy on July 20, 1988, leaving Molloy with no official status in Oxford House, Inc., On July 5, 1990, they sent Molloy a registered letter telling him to produce financial data and revoking his power of attorney.

The letter also says: "The Global Monthly Financial Reports furnished to the Board on a monthly basis have been inadequate and unresponsive. Therefore, the Board directs you to furnish to the Board by July 31, 1990, a detailed accounting of all income to Oxford House, Inc., from May 1989 through and including June 30, 1990, to include

monies from contracts, grants, honoraria, consulting fees, or any other income received, and all disbursements, to include salaries of all personnel, including yourself, general and administrative expenses, capital expenditures, personal expense accounts, all escrow accounts, operating expenses and all other expenses. Also provide a balance sheet for the period ending June 30, 1990, stating all fund balances as of that date."[88]

When the Board got no answer to the registered letter, they inquired and Molloy's response was to claim he never saw the letter. Eight days after his power of attorney was revoked, Molloy, on July 13, 1990, filed a $920,000 response to a Request for Proposal (RFP) from a federal agency dated a month earlier on June 13, 1990.

July was to bring more surprises. Under questioning by the Board of Directors, a CPA and an attorney, Molloy admitted he contracted with a number of states to open Oxford Houses while claiming to be chief executive officer. He further said that if the states knew this, there could be trouble trying to untangle problems with contracts.

At the July 15, 1990, Board meeting Molloy began by mentioning that if his response to the RFP from ADAMHA were approved there would be plenty of money for board members to take trips and have expense money.

He brought with him, presumably to demonstrate openness, a copy of the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) RFP and the Oxford House response to it in hopes of being awarded the contract. The RFP concerned requirements of the NIAAA. I casually leafed through the document and was stunned to see the headings: "METHADONE DEMONSTRATION HOUSES" and "CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEMONSTRATION HOUSES."[89]

The federal government was asking Oxford House to open three houses similar to those already in existence for alcoholics and drug addicts. In addition, the proposal required Oxford House to find and open three houses for methadone users, and three houses for convicted felons who were released from prison and had received substance abuse treatment.

It's hard to find the words to express how wrong it was to associate Oxford House with methadone. It was so mountainously, monumentally, colossally wrong that everybody connected with Oxford House instantly knew it was wrong. Oxford House and potential methadone houses were exact opposites. The primary purpose of Oxford House residents was to stay sober a day at a time and learn to live together without alcohol and drugs. The primary purpose of methadone houses was to deal with opiate addictions like heroin each day by taking methadone, another addictive opiate.

Molloy had responded positively to the RFP eight days after the Board had removed his power of attorney and without alerting the Board he was trying to commit Oxford House to establishing criminal and methadone houses.

An ugly provision of the ADAMHA/NIAAA RFP would forbid outreach persons from Oxford House from trying to persuade methadone-using house residents to live alcohol and drug free lives, perhaps in traditional Oxford Houses.

It's hard to believe that the ADAMHA/NIAAA could have put together such a clueless proposal. It was a single-source proposal, presumably with some political backing. Anyone could foresee how a small organization based on AA principles would have to tie itself into knots to develop houses for methadone users and convicted felons.

Methadone houses would have legal, medical and security problems never imagined in an Oxford House. Oxford Houses had never discriminated against those who had been in prison. But Oxford House residents chose their fellow house members by vote. Some may have been heroin users or even formerly used methadone, and others may have committed felonies and served time, but all were alcohol and drug free and committed to staying that way.

ADAMHA/NIAAA surely suspected it was folly to send Oxford House such a complex, preposterous RFP. Molloy's response should have been to immediately mark it rejected and send it back. Both the methadone and ex-prisoner houses would have required extensive consultation and coordination with the drug abuse bureaucracy and the court and probation officers. Instead of being democratically run, the houses would have bureaucratic overlords both on and off site.

Just looking at the cover letter in response to the RFP made me downhearted and pessimistic. Instead of aid to start Oxford Houses, it was clear the intent was to use the good name of Oxford House to start non-Oxford Houses.[90] [91]

Molloy's theory was to give the methadone and felony houses different names, yet with Molloy and Charles van der Burgh of Oxford House, Inc., being top paid managers of the projects under the banner and management of Oxford House. Oxford House and methadone and ex-prisoner houses management would be inexorably commingled. Oxford House would manage the houses and would file the reports. Oxford House personnel would receive pay for each component.[92] [93]

When information leaked of the methadone proposal, the reaction of Oxford House residents and alumni was fierce and unanimously negative. Oxford House members recalled the early history of AA when members rejected the idea of opening rehabilitation hospitals to make money. That decision reminded Oxford House members of AA's tradition: "An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose."

As we got sober in Oxford Houses our beliefs and principles, as stated often in our Oxford House literature, were what worked for AA. We had gotten sober in AA and always based our Oxford House traditions on those AA traditions like "Our leaders are

but trusted servants, they do not govern." Our decisions are based on a "group conscience."

Molloy had formed a subgroup of people mostly unfamiliar with Oxford House, using the good name of Oxford House and had bid on a large government contract to start houses diametrically opposed to AA and Oxford House traditions, values, and principles. It was anathema to Oxford House residents. It was divisive and poisonous.

I had seen how government-supported, operated and regulated halfway houses were run, subject to political whims. As soon as Molloy and I began discussing starting the first self-supporting, democratically run Oxford House I was a true believer it could work. I began saving paperwork to document the steps we were taking, so others could see the early history of what I believed would be a successful recovery organization. I believed alcoholics and drug abusers could find, pay for, and manage their own dwellings and their own lives even before we signed a lease on the first Oxford House. There were trials and tribulations but we survived and expanded. I believed in Oxford House as a way to achieve sobriety and honorable lives. Others accepted the same beliefs as we expanded. Some residents left thriving Oxford Houses to start new houses as a way to return and pass on the blessings they had received, in a Twelfth Step tradition.

I hope I had no self-righteous opinions about people who used the opiate methadone to manage their lives. They just weren't eligible to live in Oxford House and it wasn't acceptable in the Oxford House traditions to provide them housing.

All those released from prison have a right to seek housing that advances their sobriety, and Oxford House always had residents who had served time in prison, but it wasn't in our traditions to provide houses for any government-supported and regulated special population. Oxford Houses were open to any alcoholic and former drug abuser who could convince the residents of an Oxford House of their intent to stay sober, pay their fair share, and cooperate in group living.

Reaction of Oxford Houses and Alumni

Molloy could have apologized and withdrawn the methadone/prisoner proposal at any time and saved himself the resultant acrimony. But when it became clear that Molloy had no intention of withdrawing the proposal to the government, the Oxford House reaction was vitriolic.

Shortly after the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, Oxford House proud alumni organized an Oxford House Alumni Association (OHAA)] The purpose was to share experiences in Oxford Houses, to aid in expansion, and to be of help to recent alumni. It quickly gained 40 members in 1989.[94]

OHAA members were alarmed when they heard of the prospect of involvement with drug-use houses and ex-felon houses, and organized a town hall meeting of house presidents, board members, residents and alumni on August 21, 1990.

At the August 1990 town hall meeting, the sentiment about methadone houses couldn't have been more hostile. I expounded on notes I had made [95] saying, among other things, the methadone, prisoner proposal would never have seen daylight if there were a group consensus. Some at the meeting were hearing of the methadone and prisoner proposal for the first time. They were such a violation of recovery and Oxford House principles that there was no debate. There was a group conscience that night, a 27-1 vote in opposition to the proposal. Molloy was the single vote in favor, yet to the astonishment of the group he didn't immediately say he would withdraw the proposal.

Oxford House presidents and alumni signed letters to Roberta Wilhelm of NIAAA's Contracts Management Branch asking that the proposal be delayed "until the Board of Directors can consider it, at which time we hope and believe that it will be formally withdrawn." Some of these are included in the documents attached.[96]

Oxford House members and alumni were busy the next day writing in opposition to the proposal. I wrote a long explanation for my resistance to the proposal and mailed it to each Oxford House, asking they write the Board expressing their dissent.[97] I sent a brief letter against the proposal to Robert Trachtenberg, deputy administrator of the federal Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA), whom Molloy and I had met with soon after the Anti Drug Abuse Act.[98] The co-founders of the Oxford House Alumni Association wrote Trachtenberg and Roberta Wilhelm, chief of the NIAAA contracts branch saying "We are unanimously opposed to any affiliation of Oxford House with methadone houses or houses that are exclusively for convicted felons or restricted to any specific group."[99]

On September 24 and 28, 1990, the Alumni Association wrote, over my signature,[100] [101] the many reasons for their opposition to the response and the way it was submitted when Molloy's only link with the corporation had been revoked and the Board had never seen the proposal.

I wrote: "I want to begin with the most blatant deficiencies of the Oxford House proposal of July 13, 1990.… The proposal was submitted by Paul Molloy who listed himself as chief executive officer. He had never been elected chief executive officer….. In fact, on July 5 the Board of Directors informed him by registered letter that he could no longer act as corporate attorney. He had no [official] connection with the corporation."

"The Board of Directors on July 13, 1990, had not approved the proposal because they had never seen the proposal." "It may have been a Paul Molloy proposal, but it was not an Oxford House proposal."

“Molloy has paid special attention to the board members. At least three had been on trips with him. One board member who had been especially critical of Molloy’s method of operations began to support him after she returned from an Oxford House trip with him to the Virgin Islands. One and perhaps two board members were offered an opportunity to work for Oxford House and take trips while remaining on the payroll of their old employers.”

“The board of directors, I understand, has since sent a letter favoring the proposal, or at least parts of the proposal, an action directly opposite to the wishes of the Town Meeting group conscience.”

My letter to Trachtenberg continued: “To term the proposal legitimate would require a paragraph in procurement regulations something like: If a proposal is submitted by someone other than an officer of a corporation, claiming to be an officer of that corporation and without the knowledge or approval of its governing board, the NIAAA can deem it a legitimate proposal at some time after the RFP deadline has passed, even if it violates the principles of the organization, so long as a majority of the Board of Directors can be later persuaded to back the proposal.”

“I don’t think the NIAAA wants to get into a murky contracting situation like this. I hope, as does the Oxford House Alumni Association, that these additional facts will lay the proposal to rest.”

The letter also mentioned that Oxford House had opened three houses in Kansas City and three houses in South Carolina for a total of $46,000, far less that the $920,000 in the proposal for nine houses.

We at the Oxford House Alumni Association also broadened the knowledge of the proposal’s problems by sending copies of the September 24 letter [100] to two of the congressmen involved in passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, Reps. Edward Madigan and John Dingell, and three officials at the NIAAA.

Another letter to Trachtenberg on 28 September [101] added that Charles van den Bergh, who signed the response to the RFP as chief financial officer had, like Molloy, had never been elected by the Oxford House Board.

The antagonism at Molloy for connecting Oxford House with methadone and prisoner houses was so intense and pervasive that we took other steps to get it cancelled.

A third letter from the Oxford House Alumni Association sent over my signature was to alert the staff associate of the House Subcommittee on Health and Environment to the situation.[102]

I also wrote a letter to alcohol and drug state directors outlining the dubious nature of contracts negotiated with Molloy posing as chief executive officer.[103]

John Peacock of the Oxford House Alumni Association and I met with one of the senior members of the Office of Inspector General of Health and Human Services to disclose the muddle of the methadone proposal. They listened carefully.

Board Time Machine

In an effort to obscure Molloy's submission of a contract proposal without corporate authority, he had the Board of Directors adopt a resolution by telephone, as follows:[104]

"To cover any hiatus of authority between the grant of general power of attorney executed July 20, 1988, to J. Paul Molloy and the revocation of said power executed July 22, 1990, the Board Hereby grants authority to J. Paul Molloy to act with the normal powers of Chief Executive Officer of the corporation except that such power shall (1) not include the execution of contracts on behalf of the corporation, and (2) the power shall exist until the Board's next scheduled meeting to decide corporate organization on August 12, 1990."

Several things about this resolution are most peculiar. First, the resolution says that it was voted on by telephone canvas on July 23, but it was signed by the Chairman the day before on July 22. More importantly, the idea of giving anybody retroactive authority is ridiculous. Can't be done. Molloy's power of attorney was revoked on July 5, 1990 not July 22, 1990, [see reference [88] on p. 54] a difference of 17 days, and eight days before he submitted the proposal when he had absolutely no position of authority to connect Oxford House with methadone houses or any other contract.

This resolution was the first time I had ever seen or heard of Molloy being called Chief Executive Officer by anybody except himself. If there was a vote making him CEO, it limited his authority until the Board's next meeting to decide corporate organization, a peculiar limitation.

Methadone Goes Down in Flames

On August 23, 1990, a month after the town meeting, I received a letter from Roberta Wilhelm, chief of the Contracts Management Branch at the Office of Treatment Improvement saying, "We assure you that the matters raised in your letters and the town meeting resolution will be fully assessed and resolved."[105] I felt that the proposal would die even with political sole-source backing.

On November 5, 1990, came the official cancellation of the RFP from Robert Trachtenberg, ADAMHA deputy administrator. "Based on both technical and budget considerations associated with the proposal, the RFP has been cancelled."[106]

Ms Wilhelm of the Contracts Management Branch followed up November 13, 1990, with specifics of the failures of the proposal. Among others she wrote "the proposal displays a lack of sensitivity and an unacceptable bias against methadone treatment, for example, stating on page 8 that 'methadone users are committed not to sobriety

but to an alternative addiction,' and referring to methadone patients as users and addicts."

It added: "Your bias against methadone treatment continues to persist as evidenced by the discussions held during negotiations."

It was crystal clear from the government's explanation of rejection of the proposal that Molloy must have known that methadone houses—residents seeking daily sobriety versus residents using drugs daily—were an impossible fit with Oxford House.

Further, the federal rejection said: "You stated that, even after making adjustments to reduce the number of demonstration houses from three to one each for methadone patients and ex-criminal offenders, the Government requirement could not be performed for less than $700.000. This is approximately 75% over the Government cost estimate that OTI continues to believe is reasonable."[107]

The Office of Inspector General also notified the Oxford House Alumni Association of the rejection of the proposal, pointing out that ADAMHA/NIAAA did not believe that reasonable costs could be negotiated.[108]

There was rejoicing when Oxford Houses learned the proposal had been spurned.

After the Methadone RFP Died

I still had contacts and the possibility of opening houses on the West Coast, but progress was slow as molasses. I suspected interference.

On December, 3, 1990, an article in *Insight* magazine appeared under a gigantic heading: "Bad Blood Between Founders Threatens Recovery Houses."[109]

In fairness to the author, who knew nothing about Oxford Houses or recovery and would believe about anything he was told, he did call me to get information for the piece. I told him everything I had written in opposition to methadone and prisoner houses was true and available to him, and beyond that I didn't think a magazine was a proper place to discuss internal differences about Oxford House.

In retrospect, it was a mistake not to be interviewed since the resulting article contained many errors and was a personal attack on me. The article totally misrepresented the actions I had taken, describing it as an attack on the organization's plans to expand the houses and as an attempt by me to take over the organization. Nothing could be further from the truth. The article ignored Molloy's lack of official status with the corporation, imperial treatment of the Board, and submission of a proposal to the government to start houses for methadone users without Board knowledge or agreement. My sole purpose was to fight Molloy's response to the RFP that would have resulted in Oxford House opening methadone housing, a concept in utter disagreement with Oxford House principles and values, sobriety, the soul of

Oxford House. His organization chart shows that methadone houses would have been part of Oxford House, Inc.[93]

I did take strong actions but they were taken solely to present the facts to the Federal decision makers who had issued the RFP and who would have awarded the contract, and to others who would be involved in Oxford House expansion, and to encourage the Oxford House Board to require some accountability from Molloy.

In the end the government decided against letting a contract, citing among its reasons the very high cost of Molloy's proposal and the bias against methadone users shown by the Oxford House representatives in discussions with the government.

Regarding the unnecessary personal attacks on me in the article, I will just say that never before or after in my life have I been accused of any of the words used to assault my personality and honor.

Regarding mistakes in the magazine article, this paper so far has refuted most of the errors with documented facts. Some other errors in the article were:

1. The article stated that Molloy said that "O'Neill's image of expansion was that he and I would occasionally go out and start a house and have these new recovering alcoholics be grateful to John and Paul. Now he seems willing to tear the whole thing down just for spite and in anger." This statement is ludicrous. On the contrary, I had worked tirelessly to expand Oxford House, applying for grants, looking for and renting houses with my own signature, corresponding with people around the country to launch houses, and making proposals to open houses myself in California. To assert I wanted to keep Oxford House small was utterly erroneous.

2. The article said that Oxford House was begun with Molloy, O'Neill, and Holden starting one house after another. I have no recollection of Holden participating in any meaningful way in the finding, leasing, or managing of Oxford Houses.

3. The article said that in 1988 Oxford House approved a three-year business plan naming Molloy chief executive officer and providing him with a $120,000 salary and me with $100,000 and that the plan passed on a 2-1 vote. Molloy said "He wanted to be CEO, not me." This is nonsensical. It was not possible to have a 2-1 vote with a nine-member Board which would be needed to approved any three-year business plan and elect corporate officers. I never wanted the job of executive director and I would not have allowed a salary of $100,000 for myself. I never received a penny from any of Molloy's proposed plans.

4. The Board sent Molloy a letter revoking his power of attorney, which Molloy claimed he never saw. The magazine article said this created confusion since it didn't alter his status as CEO, which meant he was still empowered to run the organization and make contracts on behalf of the corporation. Problem was, Molloy admitted under

questioning by an attorney that he had never been elected CEO. CEOs generally can oblige corporations. It always begged the question why Molloy had to ask for power of attorney.

5. The article said “The final irony may be that O’Neill’s damaging letters were written on the letterhead of an organization calling itself the Oxford House Alumni Association. No such organization has been approved by the Oxford House Board.” I am unsure why men and women alumni of a recovery organization would need permission from anybody to show their affiliation. The Association quickly got 40 members early in 1989, including Paul Molloy, who had advocated for such alliances. The Alumni Association town hall meeting was overwhelmingly opposed to having Oxford House involved with houses for felons and methadone users by 27-1, with only Molloy voting in favor. Bryan Lennon, Board chairman, who was quoted in the Insight article as saying that the Board of Directors gave Molloy “holy hell” about the methadone proposal, had voted against it at the Alumni organization meeting but later changed his mind and became favorable to the proposal.

Before, during, and after the struggle about methadone houses, I had contacts and the possibility of opening houses on the west coast. My plans were dashed when, at a Conference on the social model at the University of California, San Diego, I saw a participant looking at a copy of the Insight magazine article. I knew then that my plans for West Coast Oxford Houses would be in jeopardy with governments unwilling to back an organization with such internal strife. My contacts in California came to nothing and it would be a long time before Oxford Houses spread up the California coast.

And the troubles did not end with the article. Molloy’s law-firm friend Tom Patton, sent me a threatening letter. “You have accused Paul Molloy with negotiating and signing contracts in the name of Oxford House without the approval of the Board of Directors. In truth and in fact, as you well know, Paul Molloy as Chief Executive Officer has at all times been authorized to engage in contracting activities in behalf of Oxford House and Board of Directors has approved and ratified all contracts entered into by Oxford House.”

As I laid out in this paper, when Molloy signed the response to the RFP for methadone houses, the Board was unaware of the proposal. Before it was signed and before they found out about it, the Board had asked me to come to their meetings because they were not getting information from Molloy. They revoked his power of attorney before he signed the contract. Molloy was sent a registered letter to that effect, which Molloy claimed he never saw. The Board may have later promoted him to CEO and ratified the RFP, but he did not have power to submit the RFP when he did, regardless of the fact that Charles van der Burgh, who also had no official office in Oxford House, signed the cover submission letter.

At the time, I began writing a reply ridiculing the assertions in Patton's letter. "Nothing in that letter that comes after, 'Dear Mr. O'Neill,' is accurate," I said. But I stopped midway in the reply because the issue became moot. Oxford House would not be involved with methadone houses because the proposal being debated was rejected. Patton's letter threatened to sue me unless I retracted my letters in opposition to the methadone plan. I didn't retract anything. As I had learned years before in the newspaper business, truth is the perfect defense against libel.

Nevertheless, the personal attacks in the article and the lawyer's letter were disturbing. I've always thought of myself as an amiable, cooperative fellow—in other words, a nice guy. Molloy and I had worked well together for 14 years building the foundation of Oxford House and there was no acrimony until issues of money, authoritarian management and methadone houses arose.

Final Thoughts

Oxford House was a spectacular success. It was counter-cultural at the time—self-supporting recovery facilities, no rules except no substances allowed, and other rules self-imposed by group conscience for the good of the houses. I know how important it is to learn how organizations that are crucial to our lives began and something about their founders. When I joined AA I read all the literature to get a sense of how it started, including: "Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers" and "AA Comes of Age."

Recently I looked at the Oxford House home page on the Internet and saw to my surprise there was a single "Founder," and no mention of me, a case of revisionist history. Oxford House is my legacy as much as anyone else's. I think the story will be told, if it hasn't been already, and I don't want my part to be distorted or purposely forgotten as it likely would have been if I hadn't collected boxes of Oxford House documents and stored them in my garage and written this paper.

Nobody can say for sure, but Oxford House may not exist but for my efforts. If I hadn't seen the ad for a house for rent in D.C. in May of 1976 and persuaded Molloy to ride there with me and if we hadn't leased it, there may never have been a second house. If I hadn't found and personally leased the two stately houses in northwest Washington that became the bedrock of Oxford House in the beginning years, and if I hadn't found the mansion in the same northwest D.C. area when the last Maryland house was breaking up, Oxford House may have lost its vitality and faded away. If I hadn't persuaded Molloy to turn his attention to Oxford House when he was expending his energy trying to get an executive job in the transportation world in 1987, Oxford House may have remained mostly local.

I treasure the first decade of Oxford House when I served as president of the first three houses and the infant corporation, looking for rental houses, hauling furniture, scratching around for money when we had no income sources, and strategizing for

survival and expansion. I am proud of the financial and legal risks I took in the infancy and early years of Oxford House, proud of my leadership in steering the organization when conducting board meetings for a decade, proud of solving financial and behavioral problems in the houses, proud of encouraging others to start houses.

I'm also proud of the way I stood my ground when Oxford House could have lost its way and started houses not requiring full sobriety or started side businesses for its leaders. To sum it up, I am very proud of my Oxford House career in the beginning in the years before the Drug Abuse Act, and proud of the way it ended for me.

Most of all I'm proud of my fellow alcoholics and drug addicts who had the courage to move into houses with strangers based on a new and barely tried system of self support and democratic rule, who bought groceries, dealt with neighbors, cleaned carpets, held group conscience meetings, went regularly to AA and NA meetings, and most and best of all, helped one another stay sober a day at a time. I congratulate those who worked on expansion and wish success to those still on the front lines.

Over the years, I looked up Oxford House on the internet every three or four years and was delighted to see rapid expansion, with it becoming perhaps the largest transitional housing recovery organization in the world, with maybe 20,000 residents housed each night in early 2025. Many, many tens of thousands of addicts have had the opportunity to get clean and sober in our houses since the beginning, I hope Oxford House leaders are trusted servants and group conscience is the rule. I hope every resident stays sober and trudges the road of happy destiny he or she wishes.

My Post-Oxford House Life

As I mentioned, birds are important to my life and spirit. I've been birding in all fifty states, provinces and at least 45 countries, having seen a goodly percentage of the world's birds. I went to graduate school. My second wife of 32 years and I are settled in a small southern Arizona town surrounded by mountains where I play bridge, go birding and play golf. I keep my golf cart in my garage, five minutes from the first tee box of a 72-hole layout. On my 80th birthday several years ago I shot a 78, trouncing my two brothers who were visiting. Haven't shot in the 70s since, but hope springs eternal. When it's scalding hot in the summer here we go to the Colorado mountains.

I saved the Oxford House papers because I was a believer in the first tenuous house and thought we would be successful and there should be a good written history. I've cited only a small portion of the papers I have. If somebody is doing research or a historical piece on Oxford House, these papers are available. But don't dally. Time marches on.

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